Clipped Wings

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Clipped Wings

by KCUrquhart

Summary

Loki has some fun by turning Clint and Steve into birds. But is it really that simple?

Chapter 1

Thick smoke filled the room, obscuring everything from Clint's view. He dropped to his knees, hoping to drop below the smoke, only to find it even thicker down low. Damn magic. Disobeying all logic. Clint hated magic. Give him good old fashioned guns and knives any day.

The smoke filled his lungs, causing them to itch and burn. He coughed, trying to clear them. It only caused them to fill with toxic air even faster. He held his shirt over his mouth to work as a makeshift filter. I didn't really help.

Clint needed to get out of the room before he collapsed. If he did, he'd be dead. There was no way anyone would be able to find him until the smoke cleared.

Clint started towards where he thought the door was; holding out his hands in front of him, eager for the touch of a solid wall beneath his fingers. He was in the largest room of the building and the emptiness around him was disconcerting. Emphasized by the silence that pressed around him. Even the comm was quiet. The smoke must have been blocking it somehow.

He walked on for what seemed like hours. His eyes were watering and his throat was on fire. Clint was starting to worry. Maybe he was just going in circles. Or maybe he wasn't in a room anymore at all. Maybe Loki had magiced him somewhere else entirely. Somewhere where the only thing that existed was this infernal smoke.

The panic felt like bile in Clint's throat, building up until he felt like he would hurl. He couldn't stand the idea of being at Loki's mercy again. Of being toyed with and led around like a puppet on a string. The bluish tinge to the smoke didn't help. It dredged up the blue memories that he tried so hard to repress. If only Clint could just hear or see something. Anything. Even Stark's snide remarks or Fury in the middle of one of his "screaming debriefings" would be a welcome sound. Something to make him feel less alone.

Clint was beginning to question if his life was even real or if he'd just dreamt it all up. If maybe the only thing that had ever existed was this endless smoke. His hand hit a cool, smooth surface. Relief flooded through him. Drywall. Clint had just enough time to register the thought before he blacked out.

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Clint awoke to a throbbing headache and a parched throat. His whole body felt strange; emptier and prickly. An aftereffect of the magic smoke, he assumed. Plus whatever pain killers they had him on.

He could hear the hushed voices of Nat and Coulson. Their voices were strangely loud and piercing (another magical side-effect). He listened silently for a minute, gathering intel. It was easier to get the straight truth from those two when they didn't know he was listening. They were saying something about recovery times. Probably wondering how long Loki's

magic smoke would keep affecting Clint. He hoped not long. This prickly feeling on his skin was uncomfortable.

Clint waited for their conversation to switch to the boring topic of the forms that would have to be filled out, before opening his eyes.

He immediately closed them again.

That was wrong. That was very, very wrong.

He eased open his eyes, hoping that the sight would be different. It wasn't.

His eyes took in two different images. The same room, but different angles. Like his eyes were somehow wider apart or facing different directions. The colors were warped; brighter and stronger and there were some he had never seen before. Each shift in movement, no matter how minute, drew his attention like it was wearing a flashing neon sign. It was equally overwhelming and fascinating.

The most worrying part though, was the rich blue softness he could see ringing his eyes and the mass of black solidness where his nose should be.

A beak and feathers.

"How the fuck did I end up a bird?!" Clint shouted. To his dismay, all that came out of his throat was a chittering sound. He saw Nat and Coulson jump, not having realized he was awake. It was rare that he managed to surprise either of them, getting them both at the same time was something for the record books.

"Hey Clint." Nat smiled down at him, warm and affectionate in a way she only was when it was just the three of them. "We can't understand you, but yes, you are a bird."

"A Belted Kingfisher to be precise." Coulson added.

"I don't fucking care what kind of bird I am!" Clint chittered angrily. "Wait. I'm not a hawk? I'm Hawkeye! How the hell did I end up as something not-a-hawk?!"

"Stop complaining." Natasha got an evil glint in her eye. "You're better off than Cap."

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Neither of them offered any more of an explanation, no matter how much Clint pestered them for answers. Which was apparently even more annoying than usual in his bird voice. But Nat and Coulson had put up with Clint for enough years to learn how to effectively ignore him.

Clint shut up, pouting somewhat, as a SHIELD vet and doctor each examined him. Both proclaimed him to be in excellent health, besides the whole being-a-bird thing.

"Any idea of how long this will last?" Coulson asked the doctor, a medic Clint had never seen before, meaning she was probably new. He was in Medical enough that he'd meant most of the doctors at least once. (Usually only once. Doctors got fed up with him fairly quickly.)

"I have no idea. It's magic. If you want answers your best bet would be to talk to Thor."

Clint liked this doctor. Straightforward. No bullshit. Even when face-to-face with the understated intimidation that was Coulson. And a distinct dislike of magic. Not to mention she was damn hot. He just might consider cooperating during exams if she was doing them.

"I'll take that under advisement." Coulson didn't flinch at her directness. "Thank you Doctor Gibbs."

The woman nodded to Coulson and Natasha before turning to Clint. "I would recommend not flying too high, since the magic could reverse at any moment." She slipped from the room.

Clint felt like she'd reminded him that today was Christmas. He could fly. He hadn't really gotten to that in the acceptance process yet. This was a dream come true. A chance to actually soar over rooftops. To see the city the way he loved: from the sky. Without the constraints of metal or machinery getting in the way.

"No." Coulson's voice cut through Clint's mounting joy. Clint turned an eye on him, still adjusting to the dual vision. He tried to scowl, but he didn't think he pulled it off. "No flying above ten feet. We don't want you turning human again just to plummet to your death."

"Fuck you." Clint chirped.

"Language, Barton." Coulson deadpanned. Apparently not needing to actually understand Clint to know what he was saying.

"Fuck you, sir."

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The feel of air through his feathers was almost sexual it was so amazing. Clint beat his wings, testing the limits of the new muscles. He sped down the hall, banking sharply around the corners before doing a backflip and returning to Nat and Coulson. Who were both looking at him with their 'don't let him see we like him' scowls.

Clint repeated the process, flying further and faster each time; making sure he always stayed just above head level, low enough that Coulson wouldn't yell at him, despite the fact that every fiber of his being wanted to get outside and climb to a thousand feet. To feel the wind and ride the currents.

"In here, Clint." Nat waved him forward as she held a door open. It was another hospital room, just like the one they'd left. Only this time it was Thor, Banner, and Stark gathered around a bed.

Clint nearly fell out of the air in shock at what was lying on the bed. It was a pigeon. Except it was Cap too. This is what Nat and Coulson had been talking about. Clint may have been magiced into a bird, but at least he hadn't been turned into a pigeon.

"What, no bald eagle?" Clint chittered, swooping down and perching himself on the railing at the side of the much too large bed.

"You should talk, *Hawk*eye." The pigeon-Cap cooed. It was weird hearing the soft bird call and understanding it perfectly.

"You can understand me?" Clint asked. He really shouldn't have been surprised. They were both birds after all.

"The avian language is nigh universal, my friend." Thor boomed. His version of an inside voice.

"You can understand me too?"

"All-speak." Cap cooed. "He understands everything. Even birds."

"Okay." Stark said. "This is not cool. I do not like being clueless in this conversation. What the hell is everyone saying?"

"Worried we're gossiping about you?" Clint asked, hoping that his feathered face could still pull of an arrogant smirk. He figured it must have worked since Stark snarled at him.

"Barton, stop antagonizing Stark." Cap said. He still managed to sound authoritative despite the fact that it was only a soft coo. Even Tony seemed to straighten a little.

"So, what now?" Banner spoke up for the first time.

"We wait for this to reverse itself. Until then, we go home." Coulson said.

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Clint raced Cap through the hallways. Cap was faster, but he didn't have Clint's ability to judge corners and angles. "Eat my tail feathers!" Clint couldn't resist throwing the taunt as he banked around a corner that Cap didn't adjust for, having to throw out his wings and scramble to avoid crashing into the wall.

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Phil couldn't help smiling slightly as a bright blue streak flew past his head, just ahead of a tannish-grey one. At least the two were enjoying themselves. They were handling the change better than he had expected. Barton didn't even seem to mind too much that he wasn't a hawk. Phil wondered if there was any rhyme or reason to their bird forms or if Loki had just picked them at random. He somehow doubted it. Loki loved mischief. He was constantly overthinking everything. Meaning he'd picked out the birds forms with a goal in mind.

"Captain, a word." Phil dropped back from the rest of the group and held up his hand for Cap to use as a perch. The man – bird – Phil wasn't sure what to call him, settled elegantly on his hand. Standing in what Phil assumed was his attempt at attention. "I trust you to obey orders and keep low. Barton is another matter. I cannot keep an eye on him all the time. Do your best to keep him safe."

Cap bowed his head once in acknowledgement before spreading his wings and taking off after the flash of blue that streaked past. It was truly a shame that the man didn't get turned

into a bald eagle. Fury would have loved that. It would have been a perfect opportunity for good press. Instead Cap, the most incredible and unique man Coulson had ever met (well, maybe not. Because when it came to unique, Barton outshone everyone) so to see him as a common, lowly pigeon… Phil was almost embarrassed for him.

Wrangling Barton into the elevator took far too much effort. The man wouldn't stop flying. Not even for a second. He kept flying small and fast circles above their heads. Phil hoped that the magic wasn't going to wear off and have him come crashing down on their heads. Cap at least stayed perched on Stark's shoulder during the trip in the confined space. Though he flew off again as soon as the doors slid open. Barton dashed after him.

"Stop moping, geez." Stark shouted after them. Neither of the birds seemed to notice. "You'd think they actually like being birds." He said more quietly, to the rest of them, as they made their way to the huge black SUV that SHIELD had built specifically for transporting the Avengers. It had extra support to handle Thor's weight (and Hulk's if it ever came to that) along with the standard bullet-proofing.

"Knowing Clint, he does." Natasha smiled and slipped into the passenger seat.

"Hey!" Tony shouted at her. She simply closed the door and made a show of locking it. "Not fair, you had shotgun on the way here."

"I do not remember that being listed in the rules of Shotgun." Thor said, confused. "Did I not understand the game correctly?"

"You understood fine." Coulson opened the door to slide into the driver's seat. He didn't trust any of the others behind the wheel. "Stark is just upset that he didn't think to call it."

Getting Barton into the car turned out to be even more difficult than getting him in the elevator. Phil spent ten minutes arguing with him through Thor about all of the reasons that flying back to the Tower behind the car would be a bad idea. The discussion had ended when Natasha had threatened getting involved. Even with a literal bird brain Barton wasn't an idiot. He finally settled himself onto the back row that was usually reserved just for Bruce. The man needed space in order to handle all of them in the car for any length of time. Not that Phil could blame him.

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"Holy fuck!" Clint couldn't help saying as he perched himself on the railing of the balcony. He'd always loved the main balcony of the Tower, but now… well shit! It was indescribable. The reflection of the setting sun glistening off the glass buildings, creating a rainbow of colors. The purply-reds taking on a richness that he couldn't describe. It was like living with a box of 12 crayons then stumbling upon the 64 pack. He had never even realized he'd been missing anything. Now he felt sorry for the people who would never get to see this.

"The colors are something else." Steve settled beside him. "It's going to make drawing frustrating. Not being able to use these shades."

"Yeah."

They fell into a comfortable silence. Content to simply watch the shift of colors as the sun set over the skyscrapers and feel the shift in the wind. It felt like a storm was blowing in. Nothing too bad though. Just a quick summer storm. It was weird to Clint that he could figure all of that out from the shift in the wind and the changes in the pressure and temperature. All without thinking about it. He just knew. Like he knew that Coulson was approaching behind them.

"Hey Coulson." Clint chirped.

"You are both needed inside."

"Of course." Steve got up immediately and flew off. Clint didn't move.

"I said both, Barton. That means you too."

"I'm fine here. Thanks." Clint knew Coulson would get the gist, but he settled down more comfortably on the railing to help get the point across.

"Barton." Coulson switched into handler mode. Clint still didn't move. "I can't believe you're making me do this." The next thing Clint knew he was being lifted up and away. Coulson's hand holding him firmly as Clint struggled to get free. "Stop being difficult. Stark has a present for you."

Clint relaxed slightly. "Well why didn't you say so?"

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As soon as he was safely in the living room, Phil released Barton, who took off instantly to start flying around the room. Phil settled himself on the one free chair. His normal spot. It was positioned slightly away from the others who were sprawled over the sofa and other chairs. Phil slightly resented the positioning, but it was necessary. He wasn't a part of this team. He was their handler. He needed to stay separate.

"Ten feet, Barton." He said as the blue streak started pushing up towards the 20ft ceiling. Barton chittered something that Phil was pretty sure was inappropriate. He decided to ignore it since Barton dropped down to an acceptable height. Phil looked away from him to survey the room. It was an old habit. The only threat he could see was Stark approaching with two small metal circles in his hands.

There was a soft flutter of wings and a twittering as Steve landed on the arm of the chair nearest Stark.

"The Captain is inquiring as to what you have created for him." Thor offered.

"Ahh, well." Stark held up the two circles proudly. "Translators!"

Phil watched silently as Stark clipped the metal bands around first Steve then Barton's necks. He wasn't sure if he should be allowing them to use untested StarkTech. It had too high of an explosion rate. But Stark usually didn't put the dangerous stuff on others. He left that to

himself. So if he was willing to put the device around Steve's neck, Phil figured that he was pretty sure it wasn't going to kill anyone.

"Well? Try it out." Stark took a step back, surveying his handiwork.

"Were you really that worried that we were talking about you?" Barton's voice, slightly mechanical, but most definitely his, spilled out of the collar. The wave of relief at the sound unnerved Phil. He spent far too much of his life trying to get Barton to shut up, he shouldn't have missed the sound of his voice. "Cause we only gossiped a little. Or was it about something little?..."

"And yours, Captain?" Phil interrupted before Barton could work Stark up.

"I don't know, sir. You tell me."

Phil allowed himself to grin openly. "Good to hear your voice."

"Hey, what about me?" Barton whined.

"We can take that away from you." Natasha smirked as Barton glared at her. He ruffled his feathers, and Phil had to stifle a laugh at how ridiculous it looked. "That's not nearly as intimidating as you think."

"I will peck your eyes out."

"Try it and I find a nice tiny cage to keep you in."

"Do you two do anything other than fight?" Bruce shifted awkwardly in his seat. Phil tensed and the room fell silent as they all studied Bruce. Looking for any hint of green. "Relax, I'm good." He held up his hands reassuringly. "Just making an observation."

"No. They don't." Phil said as he stood up, smoothing out his suit. "Now if that's all. It's late and we've all had a trying day." None of them moved. Not that Phil had expected them to. They were grown-ups, they did what they wanted. But he wasn't in the mood to let them do their normal unhealthy shit, like staying up all night watching movies or working in a lab or training. They all could use a good night's sleep for once. "That wasn't a suggestion. Beds. Now."

"Aww, mom. Five more minutes?" Stark whined. Phil felt his hand twitch for his taser.

"I am not your mother, Stark. I'm your handler. I have no qualms about using tasers and/or traquilizers." That got them moving. Grudgingly, yes, but moving. They walked as a single mass down the hallway, Steve and Barton circling overhead, and Phil sank back into the chair as they disappeared from view. He let out the sigh he'd been itching to release since Barton had failed to respond over the comms. He let his head drop into his hands.

It'd been nothing. They were all still here. He had to keep reminding himself. But one day… One day that'd be different. One day the comm would fall silent and one of them wouldn't return. With each day that passed, Phil felt his ability to keep his emotions out of the equation

slip. These people were becoming his assets less and less and his friends more and more. Losing any one of them…

Phil should transfer. He knew that. Before his emotions clouded his judgment in the field. Because if any one of them got hurt because Phil had made a bad call, Phil would never be able to forgive himself. But Phil would never quit. Because the thought of not being there to watch all of their backs was an idea that made Phil's stomach heave. It would destroy him.

There was a soft rustling and something small and light perched on Phil's knee. Claws digging in ever so slightly. "You need to sleep too, sir." Barton said quietly. Phil let out a single cough of laughter. "Don't make me start clawing the suit." Phil leveled Barton with the sternest glare he had. Barton simply stuck out his tongue and flew a few feet away, hovering in the air. Waiting to Phil to move.

Phil heaved himself to his feet, using the arms of the chair to push himself up. As soon as he was up, Barton sped off down the hallway. A flash of blue. Phil smiled. Of all animals Loki could have turned Barton into, he was glad it was a bird. The one thing Barton would enjoy the most.

The smile dropped from Phil's face while the thought was crossing his mind.

Why would Loki pick a bird? He knew Barton. Knew that the man would love having wings. So why would he give him that? What was he playing at? Phil shivered as he remembered the gleam in Loki's eye as he had stabbed Phil in the back. The God of Mischief. Always manipulating and playing mind games. Loki was up to something. And Phil was going to figure out what it was.

Chapter 2

Phil spent the better part of the next week buried in paperwork. The few moments he had to himself, he spent researching, trying to understand Loki's motives. Which was never his favorite activity. Loki was so crazy that even a few minutes trying to think like him made Phil want to kill someone. Which would be fine if certain Avengers took the hint to leave him alone. Unfortunately, Barton was even more annoying in his bird form than he had ever been as a person.

"What'cha doing?" Barton was currently swooping and diving around Phil's office in the Tower, creating an obstacle course out of chair legs and lamps. It was distracting, and not just because Phil's heart clenched every time Barton tried to see how close he could dive towards the floor without actually hitting. It had taken a few days for Phil to get used to hearing Barton's voice distorted by the electronic translator and with the quiet chittering tone behind it.

"I am working, Barton."

"You're always working." Barton whined. Phil sighed, closing the file he was reviewing. That asset had turned out to be a dead end. He threw the pile aside and picked up the next one in a pile. "Be more specific."

"I am currently going through the list of assets who have information on magical transformations. I'd like to know exactly how long I'm going to be on bird-sitting duty."

"Oh." Barton's wings slowed and he glided down until he was perched atop Phil's computer. The royal blue of his feathers looking even more sharp in the fluorescent lighting. Phil wasn't sure how he knew that it perfectly matched Barton's eye color. Or why he found it so stunning. "Any news on how long I'll have wings?"

"Getting tired of it already?"

"Fuck no! But if they know I'm not turning back for another week or something then they'll be no reason to keep low."

Phil groaned. Of course that's what Barton would think of. "The ten foot rule is still in effect."

"I know." Phil was certain Barton was trying to roll his eyes. The movement didn't work so well. "What's that?" Barton had shifted around and was looking down at the web page Phil had up on his screen.

"Information on Passenger Pigeons. It's the type of pigeon Steve was turned into." He explained. "After seeing how well the Kingfisher fit your personality I figured it couldn't hurt to look at what Steve was turned into."

"How am I like a Kingfisher? And how is Steve Captain fucking America, like a pigeon?"

Phil gave a small laugh. Yeah, it sounded ridiculous, but the more he learned about both birds the more it made sense. He was certain now that Loki had chosen the bird types specifically. Even if Phil was still no closer to figuring out why. "Kingfishers are snipers. They find a perch and don't move until they have zeroed in on a target."

"I guess that sounds a bit familiar." Barton smirked (well, what Phil had learned was his bird-attempt at a smirk).

"They also can make quite a racket when they want to."

"Well, that's not me at all."

"Right. But the Passenger Pigeon is what's really interesting." Barton shifted, showing his interest. "Most people think of pigeons as just rats with wings."

"Yeah. Cause they are."

"But they're not. They're one of the strongest and most agile birds. They are extremely adaptable and have excellent memories. They remember every face they see and who treated them well versus who treated them ill. They were used in the wars to carry messages because the enemy underestimated them."

"Okay, so not so stupid, and maybe a bit Steve-like."

"But that's nothing compared to the fact that he's a Passenger Pigeon."

"Which is important why?"

"Because they went extinct. Even as a bird, Rogers is a man out of his time."

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Clint's least favorite part about life as a bird: the food. He loved seafood as much as the next person, but having fish for every meal got old fast. But he put up with it. He figured it was a fair trade for being able to fly. Even if he had a height limit. For now. He was still waiting for a chance to soar higher and really spread his wings. Unfortunately, Jarvis knew about the ten foot rule and took it very seriously. Clint had been zapped out of the air more than once.

So, instead, Clint spent most of his time racing Steve and challenging him to obstacle courses. Coulson had been right about the agility thing. Once Steve got used to his wings he was able to outmaneuver Clint with ease. But Clint was still more natural at it. When Steve flew, there was an awkwardness to it. Like he had to consciously think about each movement, each twitch of his wings, each shift in his feathers. Just watching him made Clint's skin crawl.

Clint and Steve spent most of their time together, and Clint found himself warming up to the man with each passing day. He was more adventurous than Clint had expected, and could talk for hours if given the chance. It was Steve who convinced Jarvis to let up on the ten foot rule for an hour, just in the living room. Which Jarvis only agreed to after Bruce helpfully scattered pillows and couch cushions from all over the house on every square inch of the

floor before disappearing back into his lab. They were too thin to do much if either Steve or Clint fell from ceiling height, but they would be enough to stop them from cracking their skulls on the floor.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?" Clint nearly fell out of the air as Coulson's voice echoed around the room. Out of the corner of his eye he saw a flash of movement; Steve had actually dropped slightly.

"It's called an obstacle course. I thought that would be obvious." Clint used the sarcasm as a defense, recognizing the anger in Coulson's level voice. He dove through another of the holographic hoops that Jarvis had placed strategically around the room. Doing his best to not look like a kid caught with his hand in the candy jar.

"Perhaps you can explain to me, Captain Rogers, why you are both breaking the only rule set to you?"

Steve perched on the back of the chair nearest Coulson, who hadn't moved from the doorway. He dropped his head while straightening his back, managing to look both ashamed and at attention. Which was damn impressive. He'd have to teach Clint that. "I was under the impression that the rule existed to prevent us from coming to harm? I – "

"That is exactly why it exists." Coulson interrupted. And damn, he must be pissed if he was acting like this to Captain America. His fucking hero. "Either of you could regain your human form at any time. It would be rather inconvenient for SHIELD to try and replace either of you because you ended up splattered on the ground because you wanted to see how high you could fly." Coulson's voice never changed, staying flat and steady, but the anger behind it was etched into his face.

"If you'll notice, the room has been padded to prevent any such splattering, sir." Steve snapped.

Coulson's jaw tightened and the vein in his neck started throbbing. Clint knew what that meant. And he wasn't going to let Steve have to deal with that. Time to intervene before either did something they'd regret. Clint swooped down, brushing his outstretched wing against the back of Coulson's head (because he couldn't help but be an ass) and landed next to Steve. "I got this." He whispered.

Steve just looked at him, unmoving. "No. This was a completely safe and justified – "

"Dude." Clint nudged him. "Shut up and go. I got this." Steve still didn't move, so Clint threw his body against him, wishing he had hands so that he could shove him out of the room. "Trust me." Steve sighed and cast one last look from Clint to Coulson and back before finally unfolding his wings and gliding silently from the room.

Once he was gone, Clint turned to face Coulson, who had watched their exchange silently. His eyebrows were drawn together slightly; showing just a hint of confusion intermixed with his anger. Clint didn't explain himself. Steve wasn't used to getting a dressing down; Clint was. Plus, Clint would be damned if he was going to sit by and let anything ruin Steve and Coulson's friendship.

"Who did this?" Coulson nodded to the pillows and cushions strewn around the room.

"I'm not saying."

"You two couldn't have done it one your own. So fess up. Or I'll simply go through Jarvis' security footage."

"That wouldn't be smart."

"Making sure you all obey the rules put in place to keep you alive is very high on my list of smart things."

"And you and I both know that it'd take a lot more than a twenty foot fall to kill me or Steve. Even if the switch somehow knocked us unconscious or paralyzed, the cushions would be enough to limit injuries to a few broken bones."

Coulson growled. Actually growled. And Clint felt his jaw, well beak, drop in shock. "That is still an unacceptable risk." Coulson ground out the words through clenched teeth.

"Why are you making such a big deal out of this?"

Coulson's lips twitched. But whatever he was about to say would remain a mystery as right then Coulson's phone buzzed. Half a second later the alarm kicked up throughout the house. "We'll continue this later." Coulson spun on his heel and walked from the room, throwing over his shoulder. "And you are to enforce the ten foot rule at all times Jarvis."

Steve rejoined Clint the moment Phil was gone. Neither of them moved to try and join the others. They had both been put on the bench for however long they were feathered. "Why did you do that?" Steve asked.

"Because I'm used to Coulson yelling at me for screwing up. I know how to handle it."

"I could have handled it." Steve said seriously, like maybe he was afraid that Clint thought he was weak. Which, fucking hell, he was Captain America; the word weak ran away in fear of him.

"Yeah, but like I said, used to it." Clint was sure that his voice gave away too much of his bitterness but he didn't care.

"He was only upset because he was worried, you know."

"Yeah," Clint huffed past the stab of jealousy he refused to acknowledge. "Can't have anything to his precious Captain America." Clint flew from the room, needing to get to the safety and solitude of his room.

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Phil could barely focus on trying to keep the three giant orange lizards from trying to tear up Central Park. His mind kept going back over his conversation with Barton. Phil knew he had overreacted. But seeing Clint hovering twenty feet in the air over a hard, solid, unforgiving

floor, well, his calm may have slipped just a little. He'd have to apologize to Steve when he saw him next.

It took longer than it should have to bring down the lizards. They had some sort of armor that protected them from anything less than rocket launchers, which left the streets in quite a state. The property damage bills were going to be astounding. Phil wasn't looking forward to dealing with that paperwork. So it was well after midnight by the time Phil and the rest of the Avengers trudged into SHIELD Medical.

Phil was fine, just a few cuts and bruises; he didn't even need any stitches. But the others weren't as lucky. Tony had a concussion, again, and a few bruised ribs. Natasha was nursing a sprained ankle and Thor had a nasty wound in one arm where one of the lizards had bitten him. Hulk was still out on the streets, helping with the heavy lifting to clear away some of the debris.

Once he saw that everyone was behaving and submitting to the medical attention, Phil turned to leave. The sooner he got started on the mission reports, the better. He'd just have to make sure to grab a cup of coffee on his way to his office so he didn't fall asleep at his desk again.

"Agent Coulson." A nurse Phil didn't recognize jogged over to him.

"Which one is it?" Phil asked, expecting it to be Stark or Natasha. His money was on Natasha. Sprains usually weren't enough to keep her side-lined for long.

"It's Captain Rogers, sir."

Phil's heart slammed against his ribs. He struggled to keep his face steady but he couldn't keep his hand from shaking slightly. He clenched it into a fist and crossed his arms, burying his hand behind his elbow. "What happened?" Phil would dismantle Jarvis wire by wire if he'd allowed them to fly too high again.

"Don't worry, sir. He's fine. We just needed to run a few tests now that he's back to human again."

"The spell wore off?"

"Yes. About an hour ago. We would have called you but we knew you were busy and there was no immediate cause for concern."

"And Barton?"

"Still in bird form, as far as we know."

Phil nodded and fell into step behind the nurse. It made sense for Steve to transform back first. He had only been in the smoke for a few minutes while Barton had been in there for nearly half an hour. And Steve's accelerated healing might have affected the magic as well.

"Captain, how are you feeling?" Phil nodded to dismiss the nurse, who left him and Steve alone.

"Much better now that I have hands again." Steve's smile was strained. It sounded off alarm bells in Phil's head. He grabbed the chart from the end of the bed, flipping through it. From what he could understand, Rogers was in perfect health. So the grimace wasn't from pain. "Look, Coulson. About earlier."

Phil held up a hand to silence Steve. "It's fine, Rogers."

"No, Coulson, I'm sorry. You asked me to watch Barton, and I didn't."

"You and I both know that Barton was never going to stick to that rule. At least you made sure he went about it in a – rational – way."

"But it was my idea."

"Rogers." Phil narrowed his eyes and Steve fell silent. "It is fine. I overreacted. Now, would you mind debriefing me on the transforming-back-to-human part of today?"

When Steve finished recounting what he'd been through while the rest of the team was in the field, Phil crossed his arms. This was interesting, but not really helpful. If anything, it could cause more problems. "So, fifteen minutes between the first sign and the actual switch to human?"

"Yes." Steve nodded. "Plenty of time to stop flying and get my feet on the ground."

"No." Phil shook his head, knowing where Steve was headed.

"Sir, there is no reason to keep him restrained to ten feet. Fifteen minutes is more than enough warning to get to safety." Steve was using his Captain America tone. "The man is going stir-crazy. It's been ten days. I've never seen him confined to the Tower for so long. Just let him get a chance to get out once in a while."

"No. I know Barton. Give him an inch and he'll take a mile." Phil was struggling to not give in to Steve. Phil was trained to follow orders, and when Captain America gave orders, it was damn near impossible not to listen. "Just because it took you 15 minutes to switch doesn't mean it will for him. It's best to keep him grounded. We can't risk anything happening to him."

Phil turned to leave, ending the conversation.

"Coulson, please. He could be stuck like that for who knows how long." Steve was begging, and damn it all if that wasn't even harder to say no to.

"Does Barton know how long it took?"

"No, but – "

"Then you are not to tell him. Or any of the others. As of this moment, that information is classified. Am I understood?" Phil glanced over his shoulder long enough to see Steve sigh but give one curt nod. Then Phil strode from the room.

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Phil spent the next week buried in his office at SHIELD. It was the massive pile of paperwork that was keeping him tethered to his desk. That was most definitely the reason he left the Tower before anyone else was up and came home late after everyone else was asleep. He wasn't hiding. Phil Coulson didn't hide. But he also knew his limits. And he knew that the combined effect of Steve's puppy dog eyes along with being in Barton's company would be more than he could handle.

So he worked his fingers to the bone. Avoiding the entire team, which was turning out to be quite a refresher of his skills. Natasha was being extremely persistent. She knew Phil was hiding something and she was planning on finding out what. She made that much clear in the note she'd left stabbed onto his desk.

But this was for Barton's own protection. The man would be soaring out over the city right now, trying to see how high he could fly, if he thought he would have a 15 minute warning. This was the only way Phil could think of to keep him safe.

Phil's cell phone rang. It was from Tony, so he ignored it. He could handle Stark just fine, even on the worst of days, but that didn't mean he wanted to. But the phone kept ringing no matter how many times Phil pressed the Ignore button. Hell, he swore the ringing was just getting louder. No, he was certain it was getting louder. Damn StarkTech.

"What do you want, Stark?" Phil put enough ice in his voice that he could almost hear Stark recoiling from it.

"Sorry to bother you, but quick question."

Tony sounded hesitant, which never boded well. "What did you do now?"

"Nothing." Which sounded way too defensive. "We were just wondering if Barton is with you."

"I'm sorry?" Phil's voice came out a whisper. He was impressed he'd even managed that. It felt like all the air had been sucked from the room.

"It's just, we can't find him and Jarvis says he's not in the Tower."

"How long has he been missing?"

"We don't know that he's missing for sure. Nat said he could just be – "

"Stark."

"According to Jarvis, the last time he was for sure in the Tower was last night around 8." Phil's eyes darted to the clock. It was nearly midnight. Barton had been gone for 28 hours. Normally Phil wouldn't be worried, Barton had proven he more than capable of handling himself. But that had been as a human. Being a bird was completely different. The list of things that could kill him was longer than Phil cared to imagine.

Chapter 3

The city looked beautiful with the millions of lights casting squares of colors over the darkened streets. The night air was warm and heavy with humidity. It felt oppressive against the thick coat of Clint's feathers. He beat his wings faster, pushing himself up over the maze of buildings and into the open air. He spun in a tight spiral, relishing in the feel of the wind.

The city felt a million times larger yet so very tiny as he flew above it. Clint rode the changing air currents, letting them take him further out along the island. The familiar skyscrapers lit the sky like Christmas trees; glowing with colors that Clint knew he'd never be able to describe.

Clint knew he should be heading back to the Tower. It'd been over 24 hours and by now someone would have realized he was missing. But his wings were still aching from being cooped inside and the freedom felt so wonderful that he couldn't bring himself to turn around. He hadn't even stopped flying long enough to sleep. His muscles felt like they were coursing with lightning, the energy burning through him and constantly pushing him to fly further and higher and faster.

Somewhere in the back of his mind, Clint knew how idiotic he was being. That his wings could disappear at any moment and he'd go plummeting hundreds of feet to the pavement below. But Clint couldn't find room for any fear through the joy of the air rippling his feathers.

Soon Clint found himself flying out over open water. He spiraled downwards in large, lazy circles until he could let his wings skim along the surface. His bird eyes caught each shift of the water's surface, each bug skating over the surface, each fish darting just below the waves. He felt an overwhelming urge to dive down and snatch one of the fish. So he did, first flying up to get a better angle on his prey and wishing for a perch to work from, before folding in his wings and diving into the water. He caught the fish easily, his eyes staying open as he moved through the waves.

As Clint rose up again into the air, he downed the fish, finding it so much more satisfying than the canned crap that he'd been eating at the Tower. He wasn't sure if it was because the fish was fresh, or if it was simply the thrill of diving for it himself. Maybe he'd have Tony install some sort of aquarium or something in the Tower.

Clint lost track of time as he flew out over the waves, drawing strange and intricate patterns through the air. It was so easy to get lost in the sensations. The feel of the salt spray whenever he circled near to the shore where the water was crashing against the rocks. The smell, the sting of salt water mixed with the tang of fish and the deep, whole scent of the storm that was moving in.

Clint wove towards the warehouses lining an empty set of docks, staying just ahead of the downpour. He navigated the maze of metal walls, looking for an open window or door. There

was a difference between diving into the ocean of his own volition and trying to fly in the rain. And the latter was not very fun, as he'd discovered one day on the balcony of the Tower.

The rain had just started to fall when he finally found a window that was cracked open. He flew inside as lightning lit up the sky. Okay, so maybe a giant metal building wasn't the smartest idea, but at least it was dry. The warehouse was one single massive room, filled with thousands of wooden crates. They were stacked in uneven piles, like whoever had placed them there hadn't really cared about keeping them organized. The paths between them wove and twisted and Clint was extremely grateful for the ability to fly above them.

He wound his way through the rafters, searching for someplace to wait out the storm. But all of them were made of steel and another flash of lightning made him decide that maybe the boxes would be a safer perch. He settled onto the highest pile, near the very center of the warehouse. The moment he curled in his wings the exhaustion hit him. It suddenly felt like he'd been flying for days without stopping, which was almost true.

It had just been so ridiculous to even think about landing when he knew this was the only chance he was going to get to fly however high he wanted. Coulson would put his ass on lockdown as soon as Clint went back. He wouldn't be surprised if Coulson actually followed through with Natasha's threat of a cage. And maybe that was why he still hadn't gone back. Because he knew how they all would react, and he wasn't ready to face that quite yet.

Not that they all weren't being ridiculously supportive with the whole bird thing, cause they were. But things were different, especially now that Steve had switched back to human. Whenever Clint was out on the balcony for more than five minutes, someone would come out and join him. Whenever the group was eating a meal together, they'd make sure to set Clint a place at the table. Tony had built him a perch in the living room so he had his own place during movie nights.

They all went so far out of their ways to make Clint feel included still. But it didn't change the fact that he was a bird. He was still stuck with wings and feathers and had to talk through that damn translator that made him sound like a robot version of himself. All of the things that he'd loved, he now hated. Not being able to eat a burger, or spar with Nat, or hold his bow… God he missed his bow… He wouldn't have minded it half as much if he hadn't been forced to follow Coulson's stupid fucking ten foot rule.

Clint felt his feathers puffing up in his anger, and he couldn't figure out if it made him want to laugh or scream. He was a grown fucking man. He should be able to decide for himself if he wanted to go outside. Who was Coulson to say that he couldn't?! What gave him any right to keep Clint as a virtual prisoner? Clint shifted and stretched out his wings. This storm needed to be done so that he could go outside and fly again. He needed to exercise to burn off this frustration, but he was stuck inside. Again. And that only frustrated him even more.

He lifted into the air and flew in circles, from corner to corner, then zigzags and grids and lines and any other pattern he could think of. He kept flying until he'd burned off most of his anger. Clint collapsed down onto one of the stacks of crates near one end of the warehouse, his muscles feeling rung out. He wanted a hot shower and to crawl into his bed. He wanted to eat cold pizza and have a beer and put his feet up on the coffee table. He wanted things to go back to the way they were before.

That’s when he heard the voices.

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Phil made the drive back to the Tower in less than ten minutes. He wove in and out of the late-night traffic and taxi cabs with the ease that came from too many ops where he ended up the getaway driver. He screeched around corners and may or may not have done a power slide into his designated parking spot. The car had barely come to a stop before he was flinging open the door and running for the elevator. A part of him remembered the security cameras and the fact that he was letting his emotions through his normal calm mask, but he couldn’t bring himself to care about it.

When the elevator doors dinged open, Phil could hear the commotion that was the Avengers coming from the living room. The noise died away the second Phil stepped into the room. All of their eyes turned towards him, reactions a mix of guilt and worry. Or, in Natasha’s case, barely contained rage.

“Explain.” Phil crossed his arms and took a wide, defensive stance. He noted Stark’s eyes darting to the jacket pocket where Phil kept his taser.

“It’s like I said on the phone.” Stark played with something small and silver, twisting it in his hands. “Barton’s gone.”

“We looked back through the security tapes.” Steve added “One second he was sitting in his room, the next, he was gone.

Phil nodded. “Stark, I’m assuming you put a tracker in the translation device?”

“Of course.” Stark looked affronted.

“And?...”

Stark dropped his head, holding out his hand to show what he had been playing with. A small silver band. The translator. “Damn it, Barton.” Phil muttered. He sighed and rolled his shoulders to help alleviate the knot forming in his muscles. “How’d he get that off?”

“No idea.” Bruce said softly. “For all intents and purposes, he shouldn’t have been able to.”

“The band itself is virtually indestructible and the closure mechanism would require opposable thumbs to operate.” Tony explained, looking down at the translator like it had betrayed him somehow.

“So, what’s plan B?” Bruce asked. “It’s not like we can put out an APB on a bird.”

Phil knew Bruce was right. He’d been clinging to the knowledge that Stark loved knowing where all his tech was at all times. Losing that, he felt lost. Damn it all, Barton. Phil should have known he would try and pull some sort of stunt like this. Should have been more vigilant. And now it was too late, Barton was gone and Phil had no idea how to even start looking for him.

“Phil?” He opened his eyes, not realizing he’d closed them, to find the group all staring at him. It was Natasha who had spoken. She had crossed the room and was standing just a few feet away from him, a rare soft smile on her face. “Barton can take care of himself. He’ll be fine.” She took a step forward and they wrapped their arms around each other. Phil felt himself collapse into it, trusting her to help keep him standing. “We’ll find him.”

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Clint edged towards the side of the crate, peering down towards where the voices were emanating from. There were three men in dark coats, slick from the rain, gathered around a single crate. Instantly Clint was on alert. Everything about these men screamed trouble, from their dark greasy hair to the guns he could see holstered to their hips.

“But I still don’t get why he needs it right now.” One of them said, lifting up a crowbar Clint hadn’t noticed. “Couldn’t he have at least waited until the storm passed?”

“Scared you’re gonna melt?” another one of them drawled in a New Jersey accent. He punched the shoulder of the first man, slightly too hard to be entirely playful. It knocked him enough that he had to take a step to keep from falling over. The crowbar went skittering to the floor, making a loud clang against the concrete.

“Behave yourselves.” The third man, clearly the leader, stepped forward and grabbed the crowbar, flinging it at the second man. “We all knows why we’s all scared of thunder now. So let’s get this over with and goes home before any Avengers show up, capisce?”

The other two nodded and set about prying open the crate. Clint watched in fascination, holding his breath, eager to know what was so important that these guys were willing to risk the wrath of Thor. The moment the wood lid was pried up and thrown aside, Clint’s jaw dropped. If he had still been in human form he probably would have actually fallen from his perch in shock.

It was Loki’s scepter.

“Still don’t get why this stick’s so important.” The first guy said, stepping back so that the leader could get a clear view.

“You aren’t paid to know things. You’re paid to do whatever he tells ya to do.” The man reached down and hefted the scepter up. His rough handling of it made it clear to Clint that he had no idea what it was he held in his hands.

“But why do we need this stupid thing to take out the Avengers? The plan would work without it.” Clint’s heart was pounding against his ribs and he leaned closer. “It’s not like they’re going to expect it.”

“I know.” Guy number two chuckled. “Who expects that a Doombot attack is actually just a distraction?”

“Yeah, but that’s not my favorite part.” Man number one said. “My favorite part is the fire.” Both guy one and guy two started howling with laughter until the leader finally got annoyed

with them and just walked away. The two others followed, still chuckling occasionally.

Clint didn't move, even after he heard a door in the distance open and slam closed and he found himself in silence. He was counting his lucky stars that he'd been here. That he'd overheard the three men. It was a coincidence that almost made him want to thank God. Now he needed to get home, to the Tower. He needed to warn the others about the Doombot attack and that it was a distraction. He needed their help to figure out what it would be a distraction from, and where the hell fire fit into the equation.

He waited five minutes, counting out the seconds anxiously. Once he was certain the men would be gone (not that they'd recognize him as a bird anyway, but he couldn't be too careful) he took off. Flying out through the open window he'd entered through and out into the rain. Each drop felt like a twenty pound weight hitting his wings and they pulled him off course. But he kept flying, ignoring the discomfort. All that mattered was getting back to the Tower in time. He didn't know when the attack the men had talked about was going to happen, but he was pretty sure he at least had until the storm passed. So Clint kept flying, pumping his wings until his muscles were burning, and fighting his way through the rain. Hoping each second that the storm would last and he could make it back in time.

Chapter 4

The downpour had lightened to an all-over mist that managed to seep under Clint's feathers. The wind rushing past cooled the water to a freezing cold that seemed to reach all the way to his bones. Soon his muscles were aching and tightening and each flap of his wings felt like it was sucking the energy away from him. Clint clenched his jaw tighter, fighting through the exhaustion. His eyes were focused on the bright beacon that was the Tower.

As Clint reached the safety of the balcony he dropped low, letting his wings guide him down in an effortless glide that landed him just inside the doors. Being inside and out of the wind and rain, the comfort and warmth hit him like a solid force. Clint finally collapsed to the ground, settling onto the floor with far less grace than usual.

He wasn't sure how long he lay there, but he knew it was too long. The room was far too quiet. The Tower was never quiet; there was always someone up and moving about. The only time it was ever this silent was when no one was home. Panic coursed through Clint's veins as he remembered the men's conversation. What if the Doombot attack was already happening? What if he was too late?

Clint tried to lift off but his wings gave out, refusing to take him any further. So Clint started hopping towards the living room, wishing he had knees so he could move faster. He called out to Jarvis as he went. "Jarvis? Where is everyone?" He heard the chittering leave his throat and he couldn't help but swear. Ditching the translator had been necessary in order to get free, but right now he was seriously regretting it.

"Master Clint, is that you?" Jarvis' voice was laced with a level of concern that Clint had hardly ever heard.

"Yes." Clint said. He wondered if maybe Stark had uploaded the translation software into Jarvis. Being able to be understood would make this a whole hell of a lot easier. "Where is everyone? I need to talk to Coulson. There's something he needs to hear." By now Clint had hopped his way to the living room. It was deserted. There were stacks of paper and empty cups and a plate of half-eaten pizza all strewn about, as if they had left in a hurry. "Was I too late?"

"I cannot understand you." Jarvis sounded more relaxed now. "I have informed the others of your return. They should be arriving shortly. But I must say, your disappearance caused quite an upheaval." Clint rolled his eyes at the scolding tone. He knew that it was only the beginning and that Coulson and Natasha would be the end. The thought of what Natasha could do sent a shiver down his spine. It wasn't something he was looking forward too and he doubted that the fact that he'd gained useful information would make any difference.

Clint didn't even bother trying to fly up onto his perch or even onto the sofa. His wings were throbbing and sore. He wanted nothing more than to just curl up and fall asleep. The fear he had felt was lessening slightly and leaving behind an aching tiredness. The others were safe.

They had to be. Jarvis had said they'd be back soon, which meant they weren't out on a mission. Clint let his eyes drift closed as he waited.

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Phil's arms were crossed, his fingers tapping a steady, insistent rhythm against his skin. It was taking all of his self-control to keep from actually bouncing on the balls of his feet. The nervousness and anger were chasing each other around in his head. They had replaced the wave of relief that had come with Jarvis' phone call. Clint was back at home.

As the elevator doors dinged open Phil strode forward, stepping ahead of Steve and Natasha. The others would be following them in a few minutes. Phil planned on having a full explanation from Clint before then. He needed to know what had possessed the man to do something as stupidly reckless as this disappearing act. Then he was going to make sure nothing of the sort ever happened again. A small voice in the back of his head pointed out that that sort of thinking was probably what started all of this in the first place.

"Where is he?" Phil hesitated in the kitchen, looking back and forth between the hall the led to the bedrooms and the door to the living room.

"He is in the living room." Jarvis answered.

It took Phil a moment to find Clint. He looked from the empty perch to the empty furniture, pushing back the hint of fear that was threatening to overwhelm him again. Then he spotted the small bundle of bright blue feathers nestled on the floor. Phil let out a sigh and felt his muscles go slack as they relaxed. Clint was here. He was safe.

He crossed the room on silent feet, trying not to startle Clint awake. He could hear as Steve and Natasha entered the room behind him. Their feet made only the smallest of noises on the tiled floor. He could hear the small huff that was Natasha's sigh of relief.

"Clint?" Phil knelt down next to the bird. His feathers were dark and some were blown into different directions. There was a small puddle of water underneath him and a small trail of it that led off towards the balcony. Phil could hear the howl of the wind outside. It seemed impossible that Clint's small wings were able to navigate through that. "Clint, are you awake?" Phil reached out a shaking hand and slowly stroked a single finger along Clint's side. He filed away the feel of the soft, damp feathers into the corner of his mind that he never let see the light of day.

Clint's body heaved as his breathing slowly deepened as he struggled back to consciousness. Finally his eyes blinked open. Within seconds the exhaustion was gone and Clint's eyes were blown wide as he chittered furiously. He was hopping around excitedly and Phil couldn't help but think that it was ridiculously cute. Though he did manage not to smile.

"Calm down, Barton." Phil held up a hand and the chittering petered out. "We can't understand you. Someone had to go and take their translator off." He could see as Barton rolled his eyes, but it was more a movement of frustration than sarcasm. Alarm bells started going off in Phil's head. "Is something wrong?"

Barton perked up, nodding his head vigorously as he started bouncing again.

“We still can’t understand you.” Natasha dropped down next to Phil, gracefully dropping into sitting cross-legged in a motion Phil would never be able to replicate. “So you’re just going to have to wait until Thor gets back. Because I doubt Tony will give the translator back until you tell him how you managed to get it off.”

Barton gave a short chirp that was his version of a laugh. Phil could almost see the smug grin that he would normally have plastered on his face. It was a look that usually equated to Phil having to fill out more paperwork and talking Fury down from simply throwing Barton off the roof. Natasha’s eyebrows twitched slightly and Phil saw the gears working in her mind. “What is it?” He asked.

“Why is he hopping?” Her eyes were on Barton who was still bouncing in one place. She was right. Barton never stopped flying. Ever. It had been nearly three weeks and Phil had never once seen him on his feet unless he was eating.

“Are you injured?” Phil made an abortive move to check Clint’s wings. Barton shook his head and extended his wings out, hopping a step closer to where Phil’s hand was still hovering half-way between them. As if he knew that Phil wouldn’t be satisfied unless he checked for himself. Which was the truth.

Phil ran his fingers gently over the small wings. He felt for any cuts or blood, his fingertips deftly combing the windblown feathers back into place as they went. Phil was hit again with the knowledge of how small and fragile Clint’s bird from was. Phil could easily hold him in one hand and it’d take only the smallest of effort to squeeze the life from him. He swallowed hard, trying not to remember the panic he had felt when Steve had dragged Clint’s limp body from the cloud of fog; when both Clint and Steve’s bodies had shimmered and shifted as they slowly shrunk down into birds; as Phil had scooped the unconscious blue bird into his hands and felt the steady heartbeat that thrummed through the tiny body.

Once he was certain that Clint wasn’t hiding any injury, Phil dropped his hands. Clint curled his wings back towards his body and Phil noted the slight hesitation behind his movement. Maybe there was a pulled muscle or something. Because Clint was absolutely in pain from something.

“Are you sure you’re alright?” Steve asked from where he had positioned himself, standing a few feet away from them. Giving them their space while still able to overlook and made sure everything was okay. Phil had taken note of the way Steve and Clint were getting along better and had absolutely refused to admit he was jealous. Mostly because he wasn’t exactly sure which one he was jealous of.

Clint nodded his head and let out a tiny little huff of a sigh. Phil saw Natasha grin at the sound. Clint took a small hop towards her, trying to look angry (and really, Clint should have realized by now that he was simply too small and adorable to pull off looking intimidating). Natasha only grinned wider and reached down a hand, laying it palm-up on the floor so that Clint could climb up. Clint only hesitated for a second before begrudgingly hopping onto her hand, which she then raised so that they were eye to eye.

“Are you okay?” Her words were barely a whisper; in a low tone that Phil only usually heard in the field when the op had gone bad. It was her no-nonsense voice and the fact that she was using it now showed just how worried she had been. Clint must have realized this because he nodded before rubbing his head against her thumb. “Then don’t you ever do that again. Or you’re welcome back will involve much more bloodshed. Understood?” Clint nodded again.

Just then the sound of the elevator dinging open was nearly drowned out by the bellow that was Thor’s voice. The sound grew louder, mixed intermittently with Stark’s bitter snarl, until the two stepped into the room, Bruce trailing along behind them. The second Thor was in the room Clint started chittering faster and louder than Phil had ever heard. He was shifting his wings as if he needed to move his hands to help get his point across. The way that Thor’s eyes widened didn’t settle Phil’s nerves any.

When Clint finally broke off they all turned to Thor, who looked like he was in shock.

“Well?” Stark prompted.

Thor shook his head but he seemed to have snapped out of his thoughts. “He says that he has overheard a devious plot against us. One involving bots of Doom and a fire and…” he hesitated long enough for Clint to chirp something at him. “and Loki’s scepter.”

The room erupted into a frenzy of noise and movement. Phil blocked it out, taking a step back and retreating into his mind. He needed a second to grasp what Thor had said. He should be worried about the plot and the Doombots. But they were simply side notes to Thor’s final words. Loki’s scepter. His fingers moved up to absently trace the jagged scar that ran over his chest. The sudden flash of pain that had torn trough his body. The sound of Loki’s small laugh of victory and Thor’s hollow screams echoing around the glass prison. The scepter had burned; the sleek metal felt like it lit every nerve it passed on fire. Then there was the blackness. The never-ending depth of nothingness that felt like a gaping hole in Phil’s memory.

A small chirp pulled Phil out of his memories. The room had fallen silent and everyone was staring at him. Including Barton, who was hovering in front of him, his wings beating a ragged and unsteady pace. Phil instantly moved his hand, holding it up for Clint to land on. That’s when he noticed that his hands were shaking. His whole body was shaking.

Clint perched himself on Phil’s outstretched hand, balancing easily on the shaking perch. His huge round eyes were focused on Phil with an intentness that perfectly matched the level of whole-body concentration that Clint had in the field. He chittered something soft and short. He twisted his head around to look at Thor, his claws digging into Phil’s skin slightly as he fought to keep his balance. He repeated whatever he had said and this time Thor translated. Though Phil noticed that he seemed as hesitant as when he had mentioned Loki’s scepter.

“He says that you should not worry, Son of Coul, for he will ensure that this time no one will bring harm to you using my brother’s scepter.”

Clint half-shrugged in response to what Phil assumed was a rough translation. But Phil understood the meaning well enough. His hands steadied slightly as the steel he saw in Clint’s eyes settled over him. Even as a bird, Barton would do anything to protect him. And

as he looked around the room he knew that all of them, even Stark, felt the same way. He tried to convince himself that it was the fact that he was in a room of superheroes who were also his friends and not the small pull against his fingers, that comforting weight of Barton's body , that was filling him with a sense of warmth and acceptance. Because surely it was silly to feel so… protected by the small blue bundle of feathers perched on his fingers.

Chapter 5: Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

> (Sorry this took so long. Apparently being @ home around my mother kills my creativity :P But hopefully I'll be able to update all my stories within the next week or so.)

“But that still doesn’t explain what they wanted with Loki’s scepter.” Stark’s voice rose above the commotion. Everyone was grouped in the living room, all talking at once. “I think we need to figure that out before anything else.”

“But what about the attack they mentioned?” Steve argued. “We need to stop them from hurting any innocent civilians.”

Phil closed his eyes and rubbed at his temples, trying to block them all out. They’d been bickering for the last three hours. So far though, the only thing anyone could agree on was that Barton had overheard something huge and that they needed to stop it before it happened. But since they didn’t even have a name, or any idea of when this supposed attack was supposed to happen, they were left clueless. The conversation just kept going around and around in circles and it was making Phil’s head spin.

“Isn’t there any way to trace the warehouse?” Bruce was pacing behind the couch, his hands twisting his thin glasses endlessly. Thor was sprawled on the couch, his face set into a mask that Phil was having trouble deciphering. The only time he had spoken all night was whenever someone had asked Clint a question.

The sound of Stark inhaling to start another tirade snapped Phil’s last straw. He stood up quickly and threw up his hands, shouting “Enough!!” The room fell into a deathly silence as everyone turned to stare at him. “We could keep going around in circles for days. I’ve already had SHIELD start trying to track who these guys are to try and figure out what their plan is. Until they find anything or until there is an actual attack, there is nothing we can do.”

“But surely-“ Stark started.

“No.” Phil cut him off. “We are done for tonight. But if you want to be helpful, you could always get around to creating a translator that Barton can’t escape from.” Stark crossed his arms, throwing a silent temper-tantrum. “You will make one, Stark. I don’t care that you don’t know how he got out of the last one, just make sure he doesn’t get out of the next one. And you,” Phil spun on Clint who had been perched on Natasha’s lap during the discussion. “You can bet that I’ll be monitoring your whereabouts and if you so much as set a feather outside of this Tower, you will spend your first six months as a human again locked away in a windowless office and filling out your backlog of paperwork. Am I understood?”

Clint hesitated before nodding once. Phil could feel Natasha glaring at him over Clint's head and he took an internal steadying breath before looking up at her. He arched one eyebrow at her and her head twitched just slightly.

"Is there something on your mind, Agent Romanov?"

"Not particularly." Natasha ground out, glaring even harder at him. Phil was suddenly very thankful to be in a room full of superheroes. "Though I would like to suggest that, as we have reached an impasse, we should all get some sleep. It has been a trying day for all of us."

"Agreed." Stark piped up quickly. "I for one-"

"Will be working on the new translator." Phil interrupted.

"I'm sorry, Agent. But aren't you always the one trying to get me to have a normal sleep schedule?"

"Stark-" Phil growled, readying himself for an argument that he *really* didn't want to have.

Banner stopped it before it started, grabbing Stark by the arm and dragging him from the room, muttering something about knowing how to pick his battles. Thor and Steve followed them silently, Thor still wrapped in his own thoughts. Phil wanted to slip out after them but only made it a step before Natasha's hand was on his shoulder.

He spun to face her, noting Clint sitting half-asleep on the couch where Natasha had set him. She leaned forward so that she was mere inches from his face. "The reason Clint bolted in the first place is because you kept him on too tight of a leash. If you pull it tighter, you could lose him for good. So ease up." Natasha stepped back, giving him one last glare before plastering a huge grin on her face. "Goodnight, Coulson."

Phil watched as she crossed back across the room, gathering Clint up into her hands as she passed. The man went without protest and that, more than anything, brought the last 12 hours home. Tonight was the first time Phil had ever seen Clint let someone carry him. The only time he hadn't flown around everywhere, let alone how silent he had been. After explaining the story to everyone, the only times he'd spoken were when someone had asked him a direct question.

As soon as Phil heard Natasha's footsteps disappear down the hall he collapsed under it all, trying to sit back in the chair and missing and not even caring as he crumpled to the floor. Natasha was right. She was always right. It was Phil's fault Clint had left. It didn't matter that Clint had always planned on coming back. It didn't matter that Clint had only been doing it to prove some kind of point and to get it out of his system. Anything could have happened to him out there. He could have died. And that would have been Phil's fault. Entirely his fault. And Phil knew restricting Clint even more wasn't the right course of action, he really did, but…

The tears slipped from Phil's eyes before he knew they were coming. They rolled silently down his cheeks as one-by-one he pictured the millions of deaths Clint could have died. As he realized just how easily it would be to lose Clint for good. As he remembered every time

Clint had fallen silent on the comms. Phil wiped away the tears, struggling to fight back the knowledge that was bubbling up towards the surface, that as much as he cared for his team, maybe he cared for one more than the others. More than he should.

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Clint nuzzled into the warmth of Natasha's hands as she carried him down the hall. It wasn't until she had closed the door to her room that he realized that she had completely passed by his room. He turned to look up at her, trusting her to understand his confusion. "You're sleeping with me tonight." She re-adjusted so that she was carrying him with one hand, using the other to gather up the blankets into a small nest before gently settling him into it. Clint was out within seconds.

He was awoken when the bed gave a sudden sharp lurch. His instincts made him want to reach out, to spin and dive, using hands and feet he no longer had. In the second it took him to remember his bird-ness Clint realized that the bed was moving because Nat was tossing in her sleep. Nightmares. Clint had dealt with them enough to know what to say to calm her down, if only he could talk.

Once again cursing his bird-ness, Clint hopped to the edge of his makeshift blanket nest. Nat was tangled in the sheets, arms reaching mindlessly for the knife under her pillow. He could just make out her eyes darting back and forth under her closed eyelids. The pale moonlight filtering through the window cast long shadows over her, highlighting the deep circles under her eyes and hollowing out her cheeks. It made her seem a bit like a corpse and he would think she was dead if she wasn't twitching and covered in sweat.

"Agent Natasha Romanov." Clint chirped in shock, nearly falling over backwards at the sound of Coulson's voice. He quickly looked around the room, but it was empty. "-097842318. Code name 'Black Widow'" Coulson's voice continued. Clint finally pinpointed where it was coming from, a small speaker in the ceiling. Jarvis. "Recruitment date August 18-" Clint looked back down at Nat's slowly stilling form as Jarvis or Coulson or whoever continued to recite her file. He watched silently, smiling to himself as he listened to the long list of successful missions. (The voice skipping over all of the botched ones.)

As she settled back into an easy sleep, Clint tried to relax back into is nest. But his mind was racing and he was wide awake. His method for calming Nat's nightmares had always been just to whisper her reassurances that he was there and that she was safe, but it had never worked as well as Coulson reciting her file. And he wasn't quite sure how he felt about that… Even if it hadn't really been Coulson, just Jarvis imitating his voice or playing a recording, it didn't matter. He didn't like that they might be closer to each other than they were to him.

As the jealousy, that he knew was stupid, grew up in him, Clint knew that he wasn't going to be able to fall back asleep any time soon. He stretched out his wings but stopped as the muscles screamed. Instead he hopped his way out of bed and across the room, cursing when he reached the closed door. Jarvis must have been watching though and the latch clicked open, letting the door swing openly just a fraction. Clint slipped through it silently, wishing he could pull it shut behind him. Even though there weren't any enemies here, he knew Nat hated sleeping with an open door.

Clint hopped a few feet down the hall, each hop sending a jolt of pain through his worn body. He was halfway down the hall, taking way to long for his liking, when he decided ‘Fuck it’. Spreading out his aching wings he lifted off the ground. Even as each shift caused his muscles to scream in pain, feeling the air whistling around him and rustling through his feathers felt like coming home.

He flapped his wings and was down the hall and out into the kitchen. He banked right, cutting the corner that led to the living room, only to run head first into something ridiculously solid. The impact sent Clint’s head spinning as he dropped from the air. Two gentle hands caught him before he hit the ground and lifted him back up.

“Sorry, I didn’t see you there.” Steve held Clint so that they were face-to-face. “I didn’t think anyone else was still up.” There was a beat of awkward silence as Clint simply sat there, unable to say anything in response. Finally he shifted to stretch out his wings only to have Steve lay a gentle finger on each of them, holding them down. “You’ve got to be exhausted after flying through that storm. Just point me in the right direction and I’ll take you where you want to go.”

Clint would have refused if it wasn’t for the huge, accommodating grin on Steve’s face. And Clint really was exhausted after all. He sighed and nodded his head back towards the living room, guiding Steve through it and to the balcony beyond with small little movements. The storm had passed and the sky was entirely cloudless, letting the sliver of moon shine down from a pure black landscape. As Steve set Clint down on the cold steel railing it made him miss his days in the circus. Travelling from small town to small town, the only constant had been looking up and seeing the same stars always smiling down at him. It would be amazing to see what the stars looked like now that he could see all of these extra colors.

And, like Steve could sense what Clint was thinking, he whispered, “It must look beautiful to you.” There was a tone to his voice that Clint couldn’t quite recognize. He looked over at him, trying to read his face. Steve was staring out across the city, his eyes not really focused on anything, and there was a hint of sadness to him.

He glanced over at Clint, who did his best to show his confusion and curiosity. Steve smiled half-heartedly and turned back to the city, dropping his voice even softer. “When they first gave me the serum, it enhances everything, you know. And my eyesight was one of those. Everything became clearer and sharper and so much more vivid. It made me work three times harder on my sketches, trying to make them match what I saw.

“So when I woke up as a pigeon, and I saw all of those new colors. The pazel and blange and brack.” He listed off the new shades that they had spent hours naming together on this very balcony. “It scared me…” He took a deep breath, holding it a beat before letting it out. “Because when they thawed me out, from the ice, it took a while for my sight to go back to its super level. And there was a while when I was scared that it would never come back. And I shouldn’t have been as scared as I was by that fact. I still had excellent vision, but I’d come to rely on it so heavily…

“And the moment I saw those new colors as a bird, I knew that this time it would happen. That I’d found something new and that, in the end, I wouldn’t be able to keep it. That I’d switch back to human and that my super-serum vision would seem lackluster now. It’s just,…

It's like…" Steve closed his eyes and dropped his head, searching for the right words. Clint didn't move, waiting for him to speak. "It's like, even though I've gained back my arms and legs, that I've somehow ended up one limb short…"

Steve fell silent and Clint was frozen in place, unwilling to break the moment. He knew that he and Steve had grown closer during their time together as birds, but that Steve would trust him with this, it amazed him. It also scared the hell out of him. Because he knew exactly what Steve was talking about. As much as every fiber of his being missed drawing his bow and watching an arrow drive home into the target, being human would never be the same. He would always remember what it was like to be able to soar over the city; to ride the wind currents and feel the wind rushing past. Until his dying day, there would always be a part of both of them that missed being birds.

Chapter 6

For over a week they all waited on-edge, listening anxiously for the alarm to sound. They all began watching the news religiously, just in case whatever this fire or Doombot attack was wasn't quite big enough for SHIELD to notice. And of course Tony had Jarvis scanning half of the eastern seaboard as well.

Each time someone's cell phone rang they all jumped up, instantly paying full attention. By the end of day five they were all exhausted from the continued stress. By day seven they were beginning to get on each other's' nerves even more than normal. Bickering was always a common occurrence in the Tower but now it was bordering on full-out fist-fights. So when the general alarm rang out just after noon on the ninth day, Phil almost breathed a sigh of relief.

Until he actually read what the situation was, that is.

It wasn't just a fire. It was three fire-spewing creatures attacking a Brooklyn apartment complex. The very complex where Steve had been living before joining the Avengers and moving into the Tower. Whoever was behind this was smart. Even knowing this could just all be a trap, there was no way Steve wouldn't do everything in his power to get all of those people out alive.

Phil stepped into the kitchen as Stark went stumbling past him in the opposite direction, headed for his lab and the latest model of his suit. Steve was already in full gear and pacing back and forth across the room impatiently. The only other people Phil could see were Natasha, also already suited up and ready to go, and Clint, who was perched on top of the fridge. Phil watched for a second as Clint shifted his weight back and forth from one foot to the other, smiling at the familiar nervous habit that Clint always had before any mission that didn't directly involve sniping.

Then it dawned on him exactly what that nervous tick meant. "Oh no, you are not coming with us, Barton." He scolded. Clint stopped shuffling to glare down at Coulson.

"Yes, I am." He emphasized each syllable.

"In case you've forgotten," Phil took a step closer to the fridge, tilting his head back just slightly so that he could maintain eye contact with Clint. "You are benched for as long as you have wings. Which means that you stay here."

"Coulson-" Steve started to protest.

"Not now, Captain Rogers." Phil cut him off. "While I recognize your authority over this team in the field, it is my responsibility to ensure that none of you do anything blatantly stupid that places you in unnecessary danger."

"With all due respect, sir," Clint snapped, "I am still a highly trained agent and I do not think that this is an unnecessary risk."

"Of course you don't."

"Furthermore," Clint raised his voice to be heard over Phil's objection. "We wouldn't even know about this fire or Loki's sceptre if it wasn't for me. I think I've proven that I can be of use."

"This is not a discussion, Barton." Phil was having to use every ounce of his self-control to keep from yelling. "Orders are orders. Stay in the Tower."

"And you, sir, are and idiot if you think that is a god enough reason to stop me from trying to help."

Before Phil could move Barton had flown off of the fridge and swooped out the door, headed straight for the balcony. "Barton!" Phil shouted after him, taking a step forward. But a heavy hand landed on his shoulder, anchoring him in place. He spun around to find himself face to face with Steve. "Let me go, Rogers."

Steve shook his head. "No. We have more important things to deal with right now." Phil sighed, unwilling to admit that Steve was right. If Thor and Bruce would get their damn asses up here they could be halfway there by now. Each second they wasted here was one more that Clint was out there on his own. "He will be fine, Coulson. Even if worse comes to worse, he'll have a fifteen minute warning."

As soon as Steve said it Phil knew it would become an issue. Even though Steve had whispered it, Natasha was in the room, and that meant she would have heard it. He dropped his eyes to the ground to avoid her gaze which he could feel boring into him. He was saved from whatever rage she was about to unleash by Thor and Bruce both bursting into the room in a mad panic.

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"Barton, can you hear me?"

Clint was circling above the apartment complex, weaving through the plumes of thick black smoke, when Tony's voice came through his translator. "This thing's a comm too?"

"It is now. Thor and I are coming in fast. What's the status?"

Clint looked around to see two red-tinged blurs in the distance flying straight for him. He dove down towards the street below. He'd already scoped out most of the building, using his size to his advantage and flying in and out without anyone inside being any the wiser. He'd been tempted to say some form of reassurance to the people trapped inside, but he figured a talking bird wouldn't help their nerves any.

"There's roughly 50 people trapped in the building. The three creatures are on the ground floor and blasted out all of the stairs, so there's no way down. Damn things even got the fire escape. They've been fairly quiet the last few minutes. I'm guessing they're content to let the fire spread on its own until you all show up."

"Thanks." Tony streaked past him in a red and gold blur as he headed for the flaming building. "Now you should fall back before giving Coulson even more reason to skin you alive."

Clint's laugh turned to a squawk of surprise when Couslon's voice came over the comm. "I doubt very much if anything Agent Barton does could make his actions acceptable." Clint had to repress a shiver at the barely contained rage that he could hear behind Coulson's flat tone. "Though I may be tempted to forego any severe punishments should he return to the Tower immediately."

Clint opened his mouth to tell him that yeah, that wasn't gonna happen, when Cap cut him off. "Sorry, sir, but I need Hawkeye here."

"Glad to be of service, Cap." Clint was still circling above the building and saw as the SHIELD vehicles started appearing on the streets below. He swooped down as the rest of the Avengers piled out of one and stared up at the inferno before them. Steve held out a hand for Clint to settle onto, holding him up so that he was at eye level. "What do you need me to do?"

"You've already been inside the building?" Clint nodded. "I need you to go back in to double check that we have every citizen accounted for. Check every nook and cranny."

"I really think Iron Man could handle that task." Coulson said, side-stepping so that he was equally in both Cap's and Clint's fields of vision. "Or Widow."

"Iron Man and Thor will be busy ferrying all known civilians out of the building and to safe zones. Hulk, Widow, and I will by busy dealing with those fire-spewing creatures, whatever they are. Not to mention that Hawkeye will be able to get into smaller areas and will be able to see things any of us would miss."

Clint didn't wait around to hear Coulson list all of the reasons that this was a bad idea. He gave one final nod to Cap and took off.

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Phil tried to compartmentalize. He tried to remember that everyone here was trained to know what to do in situations like this. But he would never get used to seeing the team he was responsible for diving headfirst into a burning building. Even as Stark and Thor continued to pull civilians from the flames and deposit them at the waiting ambulance, Phil was more focused on the fighting occurring on the main floor. It was a blur of fireballs and metal and the Avengers weaving through it all, striking the creatures whenever they got a chance. The things were vicious but they had little in the way of actual physical defenses and any blows landed on them seemed to do a fair amount of damage.

The comm lines were a constant buzz of voices. He didn't bother switching over to the main SHIELD channel. Sitwell was at his side and was more than able of handling that part of the operation. Phil simply kept his attention on his team. His heart clenched tighter with each gasp of pain one of them made. His nerves were stretching thin as Iron Man and Thor argued over how best to reach a boy Barton had discovered hiding under a bed on the top floor.

Beams had collapsed around him and they risked collapsing the ceiling onto them if they moved any of them.

Barton stayed by the boy's side the entire time. Phil listened as he reassured the child, promising him that they would get him out safely. He could hear Barton's voice growing raspier at the prolonged exposure to the smoke and the stuttered coughing of the boy. Yet here he was, trapped outside and unable to do anything to help. And Phil hated that feeling. Even more so because it was just over a month ago that he'd stood outside another smoke-filled building with Barton inside.

"Would you guys hurry up?!" Barton's voice choked out over the comms.

"We have devised a means of entry." Phil barely even needed the comm to hear Thor's response.

"Well get on with it. It's a tad toasty in here and I don't enjoy feeling like Thanksgiving dinner."

"It's not gonna be pretty." Stark warned. "We have to come in from above. It's the only way we can risk not collapsing the entire building."

Phil was very much not sold on that plan. "Isn't the whole point to try and make sure that the roof doesn't collapse onto them?"

"Relax Coulson, I can do a controlled break-through. As long as they stay under the bed they won't even get dusty."

That did nothing to settle Phil's nerves. "You and control aren't exactly synonymous."

"Less yappin, more action." Barton shouted.

Phil sighed, biting back further doubts and opinions. Simply asking Stark, "You're sure it will work?"

"Jarvis predicts a 96% chance of success."

"That's still 4% -"

"The next best option was only at 45%, so take your pick."

"Fine." Phil nodded once, despite the fact that they couldn't see him. "Do it."

Phil saw a flash of red as Thor and Iron Man flew out of the building. He watched as they hovered over a spot on the roof. One of Iron Man's arms lifted up and a pulse of blue light shot out. Phil heard the explosion twice, normally and then over the comm. The cloud of debris was instantly swallowed by the plumes of black smoke still pouring from the building. A half second later there was a crashing sound over the comm as the roof fell to the floor below. Under the noise, muffled to the point that he nearly missed it, was a grunt of pain from Barton.

"Barton, what's wrong?" Phil's nails were digging into his palm as he fought to keep his voice steady. "Barton? You need to respond, Barton." There was no snarky reply. Just static and silence. "Stark, I need a status report. Now."

"Two seconds, Agent. Little busy doing heroics."

Phil was going to kill Stark. He really was. Just "accidentally" switch out his normal taser for the heavy duty one they were developing to use on Blonsky. Fury wouldn't even hold it against him. Hell, he'd probably help.

"Do not worry yourself, Son of Coul. The Hawk and the child remain uninjured."

Phil breathed a sigh of relief as he saw the two red figures fly from the building. He could just make out the extra limbs of the child nestled in Thor's arms and the small dot of blue flying along beside them. "Thank you, Thor. Why was Barton not responding?"

"His communication device became damaged as the child clung to him in a bought of terror."

Phil hesitated, analyzing Thor's words, (it always took an extra second to puzzle out what he was trying to say) as he watched both him and Iron Man drop down below the distant line of ambulances and SHIELD medics.

Stark jutted in on his thoughts, providing a quicker answer. "Ceiling fell, kid freaked and grabbed the closest thing, which happened to be Agent Feathers. Must have been one hell of a death grip too to damage the input array."

"Alright." Phil absorbed the new information, filing it away inside his head before turning to the next task at hand. "Could you please inform Agent Barton –"

"Not a messenger boy." Stark interrupted. "He can still hear you, he just can't respond."

"Fine." Phil's patience was already stretched too thin to waste any more on Stark's attitude. "Barton, stay with the medics until further notice. Stark and Thor, get back in there and help the others."

"Um," Thor seemed unusually hesitant. "The Hawk seems displeased with this arrangement. He wishes to join the fight as well."

"Absolutely not."

"Coulson's right." Cap suddenly added. Phil had almost forgotten that he and Natasha were also on this channel. "You've done your part, Barton. Now let us handle this."

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Clint could just make out the lingering plume of smoke breaking up the expanse of skyline. The rest of the team had finished off the fire creatures easily enough. He hadn't been happy about staying out of it, but he had followed his orders. The whole time he had been on edge, waiting for a Doombot attack or Loki to drop out of the sky.

They had all waited at HQ for 5 hours after the fire, but the city had been silent. Not ever so much as an armed robbery. Fury had finally decided that the fire was nothing more and had sent them back to the Tower before Cap's pacing wore a hole in the floor.

As soon as they'd gotten back, Clint had gone for him normal spot on the balcony. He couldn't stand the tension of the rest of the group. Especially between Coulson and Natasha, who had been having one of their silent arguments the entire afternoon. As much as Clint wanted to know what they were arguing about, he really just needed some time alone right now.

The wind outside was just enough to rustle to his feathers and the feeling relaxed him. It felt like soft fingers gently caressing him. It was blowing from the south east and held just a hint of the salty tang from the ocean. It was something he wouldn't have noticed as a human.

He closed his eyes and breathed in deeper, imagining that he was back out soaring over the waves again. His lungs burned slightly from the earlier smoke and the pain of it shattered the illusion. He wanted to be back out there; to fly over the city again. But he knew that was impossible, especially after his stunt earlier. He gotten one chance to truly fly freely and enjoy himself and that would have to be enough. If he was lucky, maybe he'd dream about it every so often when he was human again, rather than his normal nightmares.

A sudden grating screeching sound emanated from the useless translator still around Clint's neck. He shifted uncomfortably, trying to feel less like he'd just drug his fingernails across a chalkboard.

"God damn it."

Clint froze at the sound of Tony's voice. It had come from the translator as well. Everyone had taken off their comms when they'd arrived back at the Tower, so it had been silent for him, but he figured that Jarvis must have still been patched in somehow. Clint hoped Tony would shut down the link or figure out how to silence it before Clint was forced to go down to his labs and yell at him to shut up. He needed time to think and he couldn't do that with Tony mumbling in his ear.

"What the hell was that sound?" Steve's voice came over the comm, sounding somewhat more distant than Tony's.

"Working on translator 3.0 and there was some feedback. And who let you in here?"

"You gave me the code ages ago, Tony." There were faint footsteps and the screech of a metal chair being dragged along the floor. Clint could just make out the rustle of fabric that he assumed was Steve sitting down next to Tony at one of his lab benches. "What upgrades are you giving it this time?"

"Not much. Trying to get too fancy is what allowed for the last one to get damaged so easily. And I still haven't figured out how Barton got out of the first one."

"Which reminds me, did you remember the tracking device?"

"It was the first thing I added. Last thing I need is another anxious Agent on my hands if Feathers goes MIA again."

"Do you think he will? Fly off again, that is?" Steve's voice was quiet with worry.

"Nah. Barton's a rebel but he listens to orders when he has to. Though if Coulson keeps pressuring him like this, then who knows. I just wish this damn curse thing would wear off already." Steve gave a hesitant little hum that made Clint's ears perk up. "You don't want him back?" Tony asked.

"It's not that. It's just…" Steve sighed, the sound distorted over the broken comm. "The only reason we found that kid today was because Barton could fly through there without upsetting any of the beams. If he was still human, we would have missed that."

"Yeah, Feathers did great today, but that doesn't mean I don't want our archer back."

Steve sighed again. "But, no offense to Barton, an archer wouldn't have been that helpful today. This was close combat and he's better from a distance."

There was a sharp clink of metal on metal and the voices grew quieter. Clint figured that Tony must have set the translator down. "Are you saying you think he was more useful as a bird?"

"No – yes – maybe, I don't know. I mean. I know what it's like, to be a bird, and it's not as bad as you would think. Every moment I spent with him, he seemed nothing short of thrilled at having wings. So, would it really be that bad if he stayed that way? He's the one who saved that kid today. He's the one who found out about the fire ahead of time and why we were so quick to respond. I just think that, if he'd been human, today wouldn't have gone nearly as well as it did."

"You know what I think?" Clint winced at the screech of metal at what he guessed to be Tony scooting back his chair. "I think we deserve a drink."

"You know I can't get drunk, right?"

Their voices were fading as they walked away. The last thing he heard was Tony say "Doesn't mean you still can't drink" before the comm fell silent.

Clint wasn't really sure what to make of the conversation he'd just overheard except that he wasn't supposed to have heard it. And that Steve was right. Clint had only been useful today because of his abilities as a bird. Placed at his normal perch with his bow in his hands, he would have been unable to do anything. It was a truth Clint was used to; it came with the territory of being a sniper. Sometimes you were the most vital part of an op and others you were nothing more than a spectator.

But there was one thing that Steve had said that kept circling inside Clint's head. That little boy would have died if it weren't for him. If Clint hadn't been able to fly through that building and search through the spots that no one else could reach, then that child would have burned alive. The more Clint thought of it the more an idea formed in his mind. It wasn't

ideal, not in the least, but the longer he thought about it the more he became certain that it was what he needed to do. It wasn't just about him anymore, it was about what was best for the team. First though, he had to see if it was even possible and for that he needed to talk to Thor.

Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Phil always hated having to visit Tony's lab. Ever since inadvertently helping to ruin a Captain America shield prototype he was hesitant about the destruction that occurred all too often around Stark. So he wasn't all that surprised to be greeted by a small explosion as he opened the door.

"Dummy, what did I just tell you?!" Stark coughed, his figure barely distinguishable in a cloud of green smoke. "No. No! I don't care that you're sorry. At this rate I might have to give Butterfingers a fifth chance. Now go find a way to make yourself useful and remind me why I haven't scrapped you for parts yet."

Phil stepped into the room as Dummy went rolling past, his head/arm bowed so low that it was nearly dragging on the ground. If Phil's fingers just happened to be in the right spot to drag along the metal frame gently, well, that was his secret. Just because Stark was a pain in the ass didn't mean that everything he built was just as annoying.

"Having fun, Stark?"

Tony laughed, it turned into a hacking cough as he stepped from the dissipating smoke cloud. "Misjudged the pressure on the trigger mechanism of Clint's new arrows." Tony gestured half-heartedly to a table lined with shining silver shafts. Phil grabbed one and carefully inspected it.

"Smoke arrows? I don't remember requisitioning these."

"Cause you didn't." Stark plucked the arrow from Phil's hands and started tampering with it. "I'm just making them out of the goodness of my heart."

Phil barely succeeded in stopping himself from rolling his eyes. "Shouldn't you be doing something useful? Like fixing Barton's translator?"

"I take offense to that." Stark lifted a hand to his chest, fingers landing over the circle of blue light. "Everything I build is useful." Dummy chose that moment to knock something from a shelf behind Phil, the object clanged loudly against the cement floor. "Except you!" Tony shouted. "You are useless. More trouble than your worth –"

Stark turned, still muttering under his breath, his mind obviously back on the arrow in his hands. When it looked like he was just going to ignore Phil's question he cleared his throat loudly. He smiled just slightly at the way Stark's head snapped up and his eyes widened at the sudden realization that he wasn't alone. "The translator?" Phil huffed.

"oh." Tony nodded. "Yeah. It's here somewhere." He started digging through the piles of junk littering one of the workbenches. "Check that table, would you?"

Phil sighed and crossed to the table Tony had indicated, which was even more cluttered than the rest. He started picking his way through it, cautious of anything that might explode or try to eat him or otherwise cause him bodily harm. They'd been searching for a of couple minutes when Phil felt Stark's eyes on him. "Is there something you wish to discuss?" Phil didn't bother turning around.

"Yes" There was a beat as Tony hesitated. "Well, no. I don't *want* to discuss it. But I feel like someone should bring it up. Besides Natasha. Cause she's not really known for being logical about –"

"Stark!" Phil spun, lifting a hand to halt the flow of nonsense. "Short sentences. Straight to the point. We've discussed this."

"Fine." Stark's eyes darkened as his tone switched from nervousness to frustration. "You want straight to the point? How's this? You are an ass!" Phil raised an eyebrow at his outburst, curious as to what brought it on. "Fifteen minutes!" Oh. That. "Barton is safe. He could fly anywhere and you know that. But you still keep him tethered. Do you want to piss him off? Do you want to make it so that he never trusts you again?! Because that's what's going to happen.

"Once he finds out that you knew he would have a fifteen minute warning, he's never going to forgive you. This is basically his wildest dreams come true and you are keeping it from him. And the worst part is that we nearly lost him because of your stupidity and yet you still don't seem to get it. I mean, I'd expect this sort of double-crossing manipulation from Fury, but I thought you were better than that.

"Clint isn't an idiot. If you laid it all out for him and discussed this like rational adults then he would listen. I mean, this is you! You could ask him to jump to his death and he wouldn't even fucking hesitate. So if you just fucking asked him to stay low or tried to find some way to keep an eye on him while letting him fly where he wants… Just… put forth a little honesty, Coulson. It's what Barton responds to and you of all people should know that." Tony fell off with a huff.

"Are you finished?" Phil relished in the slight panic he saw flit across Stark's face at the hit of anger Phil added to his words.

"For now."

"Good. Because you are the last person in the universe who is authorized to preach the merits of honesty. If I remember correctly, Pepper only found out that you were dying because you let it slip during a fight." Tony opened his mouth to protest but fell silent as Phil's hand twitched towards the pocket where he kept his taser. "But I'm not saying that I won't consider what you've said. After all, you're right. Barton does place far too much on trust and honesty."

Stark seemed to have satisfied whatever had pushed him to broach the topic. He nodded and turned back to continue scouring the bench for the translator. Phil sighed before turning to do the same.

A few more minutes of awkward silence later, Phil finally spotted the metal band under a pile of blueprints. His fingers closed around it at the same instant that Stark let out a cry of success on the other side of the room. The sound came doubled to Phil's ears; one echoing each from the man behind him and from the translator in his hands.

"I think you left the comm on." Phil said, facing Stark. "Is this the new one or the old one?" They all looked the same to him.

"That's the one Barton damaged in the fight."

"You took Barton's tracker?"

"Don't get your panties in a twist, Agent. I hooked up a quick rig to monitor his movements. Jarvis will know if he tries to leave the Tower. Barton just asked me to take that one off. Said it was uncomfortable or something. I wasn't really paying attention." Tony walked towards him, spinning the newest translator as he did. "But this baby; this time I really outdid myself. Should withstand anything short of an atomic bomb. Hell, I even had Thor come down here and – and blast – just to be –"

He froze mid-step, his eyes going wide. Phil felt torn between confusion and worry. "Stark?"

"The comm is still on…"

"Yes. I said that."

"Which means that he could hear everything."

Phil was not thrilled by the way the blood was draining from Stark's face. "Who could hear what?" He asked slowly, measuring out each word carefully.

"Barton. Cap and I, earlier- " Tony swallowed and blinked, glancing up at Phil like he just noticed him again. "We need to find Barton. Now. No time to explain, but he may have misheard us and thought that we thought bird-him was more useful than human-him."

Of all the millions of times that Phil had been tempted to hit Stark so hard that even Jarvis would feel it this was the only time he didn't manage to reign it in. At least not completely. He let a single punch fly, feeling it land solidly against Stark's face and knowing it would create quite a brilliant black eye. But he didn't stand around to see Stark's reaction. He had more important things to do.

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Clint bounced from foot to foot on the balcony railing. The metal was cold and damp in the early morning but his feet had no problem finding traction. (One of the things he loved about being a bird.) Thor seemed just as anxious as Clint. He had been asking him all morning if he was sure that he wanted to do this. He knew that the last time Clint and Loki had been face to face had been just after the Battle of New York. And to say that there was still some bad blood between them would be a bit of an understatement. But Clint was determined.

Clint rolled his eyes at the enormous puff of green and gold smoke that appeared from nowhere. He rolled them again as Loki strode from the smoke in full armor, his cloak billowing around him. Anyone who said that Fury had a thing for the dramatic had never met Loki. For a second Clint pictured a diva-off between the two of them. Both striding across the bridge of the helicarrier, both in black and leather and giving each other evil glares. Clint had to quickly stop picturing it else he risked laughing flat out in Loki's face, and that wouldn't win him any favors. Which was what this was: Clint asking for a favor.

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Phil didn't need Jarvis to tell him that Clint would be on the balcony. The problem came when he stepped out onto the main balcony and Barton was nowhere to be seen. Phil checked the space methodically. It made sense for Clint to be somewhere more secretive if he needed time alone. And he would most certainly need time alone if he had heard what Stark said he'd heard. Barton was an arrogant sonofabitch but feeling useless or unnecessary was his secret Achilles heel. As was his habit of doing whatever it took to get a job done, no matter the personal cost or risk of injury.

So if he'd overheard what Stark claimed he'd overheard then the risk of Clint doing something stupid was at critical levels.

It was taking everything Phil had to keep his emotions under control as the search dragged out. Clint wasn't anywhere on the main balcony. He wasn't on the one off of the formal dining rooms that went unused until the team needed to garner some good press by hosting a dinner party. He wasn't on either balcony at each end of the 'Hulk-Out' floor that was specifically designed as a safe place just in case Bruce accidentally got angry. Phil could feel the seconds ticking past as he checked all of the most unused balconies while not-so-silently cursing Stark and his grandiose building plans.

Phil had just opened the sliding door to the balcony off the library when he heard an all-too familiar voice that wrapped his heart in blue and ice. Loki. He froze, quickly glancing around the balcony, but it seemed to be empty. Then he remembered that there was a secluded corner of this particular balcony, a quirk created by the odd shape of the building. The corner was impossible to see until you had nearly reached the far edge of the main balcony space and people in either space were invisible to anyone on the other side.

Phil relaxed marginally as he heard Thor's booming voice, hushed in his form of a whisper that was still far too loud. "I warn thee, brother. This is not a time for gaming." Phil used the sound of Thor's voice to cover his footsteps as he eased closer to the corner where the others were hidden. He had yet to hear Clint's voice (or chirp, as it were) and he needed to see if this was just a sibling quarrel or if he'd finally found Barton.

"Believe me, Thor, I understand the consequences of this decision far better than you do." The edge in Loki's voice sent shivers down Phil's spine. Even after all this time he couldn't help the wave of fear that washed over him every time he heard that voice. It always invariably led to him remembering the slide of metal through his chest. The ice that had shot through his veins, sucking the heat from his skin and pulling the life from his body. "For who better understands the concept of being unwanted. Of trusting, only to have your so-called family wish you were something else."

There was a sharp chirping sound in response to Loki's words. Barton. Phil pressed his back against the wall that separated him from the others, his attention now fully focused on the things being said.

"I still maintain that the others did not mean their words as they sounded." Thor pleaded. "They would not approve of this course of action."

There was another chirping sound and Phil wished that he had Thor's All-Speak or that Clint still had some form of translator on so that he could hear exactly what he was saying.

"I am not unreasonable." Loki's voice was too smooth. There was a chirp which Phil could instantly recognize as Clint's form of a laugh. "Do not test me, Barton." Loki hissed. "You forget that it is you asking me for the favor. One that I have no reason to grant to you."

More chirping.

"Friend Hawk, I do not believe that is a wise bargain." Phil was growing more uneasy as Thor's voice grew more strained. "Is it not possible that you are acting rashly?"

There was a sharp chirping in reply that seemed to drag on as if Barton was ranting about something. Phil used the moment to try and work through everything he'd heard so far. It was like putting together a jigsaw with half the pieces missing. But Phil had always been good at puzzles and it was only a matter of seconds before a theory formed in his mind. A theory that he prayed to god was wrong. Because if it was right then this was more serious than he'd thought. If it was right then he could be about to lose Clint forever, just like Stark had warned.

"I am growing impatient." Loki sighed once the chirping had fallen off. "There are more important matters that require my attention. So I require an answer, which species do you wish to be, Barton?"

Phil felt his heart drop so quickly and far that he imagined it had splattered onto the street hundreds of feet below. His theory had been right. Clint was asking Loki to make the change permanent. An edge of panic started to slip through Coulson's calm. He could fix this, he knew he could. He just needed a little bit of time. Just a few more days and he could figure out some way to make all of this better.

Phil felt his whole being resting on a knife edge as Barton chirped a quick reply. It had to have been a yes. Why else would Clint have had Thor bring Loki here? Clint was going to do this, and it was Phil's fault. Phil needed to stop him, to intervene before Clint did something irreversible. His body weight shifted as he prepared to swing himself around the wall and into view but he froze as Loki spoke.

"This offer will not last forever. Think the matter over and decide within the week. After that, any time that I come to this Tower, it will not be on friendly terms."

"Thank you, brother." Thor sounded as relieved as Phil felt. One week. Clint had apparently decided to think it over and that gave Phil all the time he needed.

He slid silently from the balcony before the others could notice him. He made a beeline for the parking garage, a plan already solidifying in his mind. It would be a delicate process, convincing Clint that something he had overheard wasn’t actually true. But Phil had gotten Clint to believe that he was useful to SHEILD once before, he could certainly do it again with the Avengers. But first, he needed to talk to Fury.

Chapter End Notes

Wow. When I started this fic, I planned on it being about 6 or 7 chapters total. Now it's looking like it's gonna be like 12 or 13....

Chapter 8

Clint flew into the main kitchen three seconds behind Thor, whistling a light-hearted tune as if nothing important had happened that day. As if he hasn't just made a deal with Loki that in one week's time he would have a decision. He doubted one week would do anything to change his mind. But he was sort of excited to see all of the things Thor would do to try.

Bruce and Steve were sitting at the kitchen island. Bruce was buried behind a tablet, plate of food left forgotten in a wave of inspiration. Steve was just sipping at a cup of coffee, apparently content with doing nothing.

Clint settled down next to them as Thor went for his normal box of pop tarts, wishing he could at least say hello. But at the same time glad for an excuse not to talk to Steve. He knew the man hadn't known Clint could hear his words the day before, but they had still cut deeply. Clint found himself unable to quite meet him in the eye. Instead looking at his own shuffling feet and giving a quick nod as Steve greeted him.

They sat in relative silence together (as silent as any room containing Thor ever could be) as the clock on the wall ticked away the minutes. Eventually Bruce blinked and looked up from his work and noticed Clint for the first time. The huge grin that spread across his face made Clint feel like laughing. Bruce could say what he wanted about still being nervous around large groups but they all had noticed as he grew more and more relaxed around them all. Also, Clint couldn’t help but feel a little bit of joy any time he got a reaction of any sort from the man who was so good at keeping himself separate emotionally.

Bruce opened his mouth to say something but was cut off by a shout from Steve. “What happened?”

They all spun to see Tony shuffling into the room, half of his face hidden behind a bag of frozen peas. Natasha was two steps behind him, a cheshire grin on her face. She slunk past him and quickly grabbed herself a cup of coffee before curling up into a seat, the look on her face saying that she knew that this was a good story.

Tony glared at her before glancing around the room. Clint noticed that he seemed to flinch as his eyes landed on Clint. Which, okay, that was weird. But not as weird as the fact that Tony completely ignored Steve’s question. Instead crossing to the freezer and switching out his half-thawed bag of peas for an ice pack that Coulson insisted they keep a stock of.

“Tony?” Steve’s voice was strained and thin. All of their eyes followed Tony as he slunk across the room, hopping up so that he was seated on the counter. “Tony, are you okay?”

“I’m fine, Steve.” Tony’s head was dropped and his free hand was picking at the hem of his shirt. “It’s nothing; just a black eye.”

“Did you have another accident in the lab?” Bruce asked, trying to hide a smirk.

Tony shook his head then turned to look at Clint, again flinching slightly as their eyes met. Clint quirked his head and Tony quickly looked away before glancing back then looking away again before his eyes finally settled on the space just above Clint's head. "Have you seen Coulson?" he asked.

Clint shook his head, now thoroughly confused.

"He was looking for you. Earlier."

"Okay...." Clint said, forgetting for a moment that he didn't have a translator on until he heard the chirp. There was no mistaking it that time. Tony most definitely flinched. Flinched so hard that he nearly dropped the ice pack.

"Right. Translator." Tony mumbled, pulling a silver band from his pocket. He dropped it on the counter in front of Bruce, muttering, "Could you. Busy." before slinking quickly out of the room and back towards his lab.

Steve was right behind him, shouting "Hold on, you still haven't said what happened!"

There was an awkward silence as Bruce leaned across the table and easily clipped the new translator around Clint's neck, first unclipping the small tracker Tony had put on him. This translator was heavier than the previous two but by this point it was almost a comforting feeling, he was so used to having one around his neck.

The very second it was clipped in place, Clint spun to face Natasha who hadn't moved from her seat. "What the hell was that about?"

She smiled wider. "Tony's just a bit jumpy. He's regretting some words he said and the consequences of them."

"What words?" Bruce asked at the same second that Clint asked "Consequences from who?"

Both of them were drowned out by Thor asking "The Man of Iron often does not think before he speaks. Though I am troubled that his speech may have brought harm to him."

"I don't know what he said." Natasha was practically purring, loving seeing Tony being made an ass of. "But I can tell you who gave him that black eye." She paused, giving in to the need to add tension. "It was Coulson."

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Phil barely hesitated long enough for Fury to say "Come in." before barging into the Director's office. Fury nodded at him. "Good morning, Coulson." Then he noticed the way that Phil was flushed and out of breath and Fury's brow furrowed. "What's wrong?"

"It's Barton, sir."

"Has he switched back?"

Phil shook his head. “No. And unless we do something, it’s possible that he never will.” Fury’s eyes widened slightly. Phil pressed on before he could start asking questions. “I have a plan, sir. But it’s tentative at best and I’m going to need your full authorization to do whatever I have to.”

“Of course.” Fury relaxed just a hint. “Do whatever you need to do to get our Agent back.”

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The day had passed with an unusual slowness for Clint. But that may have been the fact that he was hyper-aware of every passing second. It was as if there was a giant hourglass over his head, slowly counting down his last days before this life was permanent. Knowing that somehow threw the entirety of what he was giving up into sharper relief. To the point where Clint had to go down the the range and just stare longingly at his bow. Which did nothing for his state of mind. Especially not once Thor tracked him down and started going over all of the heroics Clint had ever achieved as Hawkeye.

Clint had listened to Thor’s stories for an hour before getting too overwhelmed. The list of things he’d accomplished with his bow was extensive, he knew that, but the way Thor told it, it felt like he’d single-handedly saved the world a dozen times. Rather than make Clint feel proud of everything he’d accomplished it made him even more determined to stay as a bird. Thor could see a squirrel manage to cross the road without getting hit by a car and spin it so that it sounded as if the entire fate of the universe had been spared. There were other agents that were at least fairly competent as marksmen that could take over that portion of his job. Though even the thought of that made Clint’s whole heart ache.

He spent the rest of the day going back and forth between the living room and his normal perch on the balcony. Initially, he’d only come inside because it had started raining again and he didn’t enjoy getting wet. But then Nat and Bruce had started having a Die Hard marathon and damn, if that wasn’t one of Clint’s favorite movies. Though he’d flown back out to the balcony ten minutes into the second one, unable to stand it any longer. Nat had promised to come and find him before they started the third one and he’d settled down on the still-wet balcony railing and allowed his mind to drift.

He didn’t think about anything in particular. Just whatever happened to pop into his head. The time he and Barney had gone to a pet store a few weeks after joining the circus and Clint had immediately fallen in love with this tiny little canary. It was the brightest yellow he’d ever seen and kept flying back and forth across it’s cage as if it were looking for a way out. Clint had been tempted to either buy the bird or simply open the cage and see what happened. Barney had talked him out of both. But he’d still snuck back there the next day and had smuggled the bird out under his jacket. A hundred yards from the pet store he’d let the bird fly free. It had immediately shot straight into the air and flew up higher and higher. It was the first time Clint had felt a bone-deep need for wings and the first time that he’d felt as if he was trapped by not having them.

In his years as a performer, Clint had remembered that desire every time he flew from a trapeze. The rush of air past him as he dropped into the net below was the happiest second of any day. It never failed to clear his mind and bring a smile to his face.

Then there were the hundreds of missions where things would have been so much simpler if he could simply fly. But SHIELD had taught him how to fly jets and helicopters and every sort of small craft and it had almost been good enough. He never got to feel the wind or sunshine or go wherever he wanted whenever he wanted. But he could soar through the sky. And that was more than that little boy releasing a canary had ever hoped for. So he accepted it and was thankful and he moved on.

But joining the Avengers had changed that. Suddenly he was part of a team where two of them flew. Actually flew. True Tony was only with the help of a machine and Thor was because of Mjolnir, but still. They had carried Clint a few times, when a mission called for it, and again, things had been so close to perfect. He could feel the wind now. And the sunshine. (or smoke, as it more often was) But he still wasn't free. He still had to rely on someone else to take him where he asked to go. It was flying though. Really and truly flying, so once again, he'd accepted the limitations and had moved on.

He had had his desire under control. Clint went weeks between the dreams of flying and didn't stare wistfully out of windows (that often). He had been clamping down on his childhood dreams and had come to terms with the fact that it was never going to happen. Not the way he wanted it. It had felt like a huge step in growing up into a mature adult, not that Nat wouldn't laugh at him being called anything close to mature, but it felt like it to him. He had stopped dreaming and had focused on reality and the missions and team members in front of him.

And then Loki had gone and given him wings.

Clint stared straight down at the ground hundreds of feet below him. Nothing between it and him besides perfectly clear air. Every fiber of him wanted to just lean an inch forward and pitch head-first towards the ground. To hear the wind whistling past and see the ground getting closer and closer until he was just inches above it then spread out his wings and ride the wind back up again. He closed his eyes, remembering his one day of freedom. Where he had finally, finally been as free as that canary.

Then he remembered the look on Coulson's face as he had checked Clint over for injuries. That fear and tension and worry. He remembered the way Nat's face had pinched too tight. They were the reason he'd come back. And they were the reason he would stay grounded now. Because as much as it felt like it was ripping his heart apart to not jump off this balcony, it had ripped his heart out too when he realized just how much he'd worried the two people he cared about most.

A voice in the back of his head wondered if maybe he was being selfish, wanting to stay as a bird. If this wasn't just his stubborn childhood self rearing it's ugly head again. But it was drowned out by the memory of Tony and Steve's conversation. Clint wasn't doing this for him, he was doing it for the team. He was doing it because they needed him this way. Because he could help them more this way.

Clint's mind felt like a jumble of thoughts and emotions and other people's needs. He wanted to make it all stop. To shut everything out for just three minutes. Just three minutes where he could not feel guilty about loving the wind in his feathers. Nor feel wrong about missing the feel of his bow in his hands. He wished he could just enjoy his time as a bird and then go

back to normal. That this could just be vacation rather than being turned into his life. He wished that there was a way that this could become something fun rather than a chore. Something to enjoy rather than just one more thing he's done because he other people needed him to.

But when had wishing ever done him any good before.

When had he ever denied the people he loved something that he knew they truly wanted.

If they needed him to stay like this forever, then he would.

Even if it meant making a deal with Loki. Even if it meant never holding his bow again. Even if it meant never hugging or kissing anyone again. Even if it meant he would always need the heavy metal band around his neck in order to be understood. They were all sacrifices he would gladly make. Because that child with the canary had grown up realizing one thing, sometimes our dreams turn into nightmares. And he would do anything it took to keep other people's dreams alive, even if it meant killing all of his own.

Chapter 9

“Clint, you coming?” Nat’s head popped out of the balcony door. She was beaming in the way that only action movies ever caused. A smile both genuine and haunted. Like she was both happy and fighting back the nightmares. It was a smile that Clint had seen all too often on his own face staring back at him in the mirror.

“Duh!” He flew inside, trying to hit her with one of his wings as he flew past, but she ducked out of the way.

“Don’t test me, bird boy.” she smirked and Clint had to repress a shiver, remembering, yeah, she could kill him without batting an eye.

“You know you love me.” Clint circled, settling down onto her shoulder and letting her carrying him back into the living room.

“For now.”

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They settled into their normal spots on the sofa, cuddling like they always did. They’d had to adjust somewhat the last few weeks, but they still managed to make it work, despite the sudden increase in feathers and talons. Every so often Nat would have to shift or his talons would accidentally dig into her if there was an anxious moment in a movie and she would flick him upside the head lightly. But usually they would just sit, Clint curled on Nat’s lap, as she occasionally stroked her fingers through his feathers.

It was peaceful and normal and comforting. It felt like home.

“Doctor Banner?” Both Clint and Bruce jumped, having been too enthralled in the movie to hear someone come into the room.

“A little warning next time, Coulson.” Barton quipped, not needing to take his eyes off the screen to know he was right. He should have been able to know by the footsteps rather than having to rely on the voice.

“You’re just getting sloppy, Barton.”

“Maybe if someone would actually let me out of the damn house and practice.” Clint mumbled, but Coulson seemed to have stopped paying attention to him.

“I could really use your professional advice on a matter, Doctor. If you don’t mind?”

Coulson’s voice was so flat and professional that, really, how was that not an invitation for Clint to be an ass? “You realize he’s not that sort of Doc, right? He’s not gonna be able to help with that rash.”

“You are not nearly as amusing as you think you are.”

Clint just winked as Bruce stood up and followed Coulson out of the room. Bruce muttered a quick “Don’t bother pausing it. I’ve seen it a dozen times.” to Nat as he passed. She just nodded once and told Jarvis to continue the movie. Clint only took a second to wonder what it was that Coulson wanted to talk to Bruce about before he got sucked back into the movie.

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Phil stopped in the kitchen, far enough away that any conversation would be drowned out by the muffled sounds of swears and explosions emanating from the living room. Banner stopped a few feet away, leaning back against a counter. Phil felt a small glimmer of satisfaction as he saw how at ease the man seemed. He’d never been happy with SHIELD’s role in forcing Banner to go on the run and it was always nice to be reminded that not all mistakes were irreparable.

“You wanted my advice on something?” Banner asked after a second of silence.

Phil nodded. “I did.”

“I’m assuming it has to do with why you gave Tony a black eye.” Phil noted the faint anger hidden behind the bland tone.

“Partially. Though, that was simply the catalyst. This is much larger than that particular conversation.”

“So I take it this all comes back to Clint? What, are you restricting him even further?” This time Banner didn’t bother hiding his emotions. He leveled a glare at Phil hard enough to make him shift uncomfortably.

“I realize I may have been a little- “

“Insane” Banner supplied when Phil hesitated.

“I was going to say protective, but yes, insane works too.” Phil sighed before forcing onward. “I messed up, okay. I know that.”

Banner’s face split into a grin. “Glad you can acknowledge it. Does that mean you’re going to finally give him a break and tell him about the 15 minute thing?”

Phil hesitated. Telling Barton was part of the plan... eventually. But that was not a conversation that he was looking forward to having and he may have left that part of his plan relatively unplanned. Luckily, he was saved from having to explain any of that by the sudden - and loud - appearance of Stark carrying a squawking metal bird.

Both Banner and Phil grimaced at the racket. “Can’t you turn that thing off?” Phil shouted.

Tony shook his head. “I’ve tried. Damn circuit is faulty.”

“Give it here.” Banner held out a hand and Stark dutifully passed over the shrieking hunk of metal. Which Banner promptly smashed the head of against the counter behind him. The metal bird gave a final little whine before going silent. Banner handed it back to Stark who stared at Banner as if he’d just smashed his ice cream cone to the ground.

“What the hell was that for?”

“You wanted it to stop making noise, I did that.” Banner shrugged. “What is it anyway?”

“It was the prototype of something I was creating. At Coulson’s request.” He nodded to where Phil was standing. “Part 1 of his: Fix the Shit I Fucked Up With Barton plan.”

Phil raised an eyebrow. “That I fucked up? Because you are so innocent in this.”

“More than you.”

“Really? Are we forgetting who said he was more useful as a bird?”

“Okay. Hold it.” Banner stepped in between them, stopping the argument before it could really get started. “Confused scientist here. Mind starting this from the beginning?”

“Barton overheard a conversation between Stark and Rogers about how he was more useful in the field as a bird rather than an archer.” Phil spouted off, trying to keep his voice level.

“You WHAT?” Banner rounded on Stark who flinched back. Phil quickly scanned Banner for any sign of green but the man was still in control.

“First off, I was arguing the pro-human side, thank you very much.” Stark pulled himself up to his full height, trying to make himself more intimidating. Considering how short that full height was, Phil was unimpressed. “And I think one black eye is more than enough punishment for that.”

“Still less than you deserved.” Phil mumbled.

“Anyway!” Banner interrupted. “What does this have to do with the screaming metal bird?”

“I asked Stark to build it.” Phil forced himself to keep his voice somewhat neutral. “A fleet of bird drones that can perform every function as Barton in his current form.”

“Meaning Clint will have no reason to want to stay a bird.” Banner nodded in understanding. “But why build them? I mean, it’s not like Clint has any say in his bird-ness. He’ll switch back, just like Steve did.”

“That’s what I said!” Stark exclaimed and both men rounded on Phil, both with a look on their face that said that they knew he was holding something back.

Phil sighed, debating internally whether or not he should tell them everything. In the end, he figured he might as well. He could use another perspective on this entire fucked up situation. “Barton made a deal with Loki.”

The words had exactly the result he expected. Both men's jaws dropped and they gaped at him for a long minute as they processed what he'd said. Stark was the first one to speak (why was Phil not surprised). "How? When could he have possibly have met with Loki? He's been locked up in the Tower. Thanks to you."

"Loki came here."

"HE WHAT?!" Tony roared and Banner quickly shushed him. Phil's eyes darted to the hall that led out the the living room but, thankfully, the movie was still covering the noise. "Are you telling me that Loki, THE LOKI, Asgardian Pain in our Asses, God of Mischief, LOKI was in my fucking Tower?"

Rage was rolling off of Stark in waves and Phil couldn't blame him. He was still furious about it himself. But he held it back, because that was what he needed to do. He'd process it when he had a moment alone. Right now he needed to do whatever it took to fix everything he had ruined, which meant sticking to the plan. "Yes. Loki was here. Though, technically, he was never actually in the Tower. Just on a balcony."

"JARVIS!" Tony shouted at the ceiling. "How did that happen?"

"I do not know, sir." The AI responded, sounding genuinely concerned. "My sensors should have picked him up should he appear within a hundred yards of the Tower. He must have blocked them somehow. I'm running diagnostics now."

"I'm more worried about this deal Clint made?" Banner spoke before Tony could spout more anger at his AI.

"Basically. Loki gave Clint one week to make a decision. If he chooses, Loki will make it so that he remains a bird permanently."

Both men were stunned into silence. Phil could practically see the gears whirring inside their heads as they connected all of the dots and everything fell into place. In the end, it was Banner that broke the silence. He held up two fingers. "Two things. First, I'm going to help Tony with the birds, which I'm assuming was what you wanted my advice on in the first place." Phil nodded once before Banner continued. "Two. You really, really need to tell Clint about the 15 minutes and let up on your rules. Because all of the tinkering in the world isn't going to change the fact that, right now, you are the only thing keeping him from getting all of this flying crap out of his system."

Phil watched them both walk out of the room, already spouting forth a steady stream of techno-babble that he could never hope to understand. He knew Banner was right. Stark and Rogers' conversation may have been the final straw for Clint, but god knows, every other straw was entirely Phil's fault.

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The living room was nearly silent when Phil walked in. The movie was in a quiet moment that Phil instantly recognized as being the lull before the final epic scene. Natasha and Clint were both watching it intently, though he was aware that both of them knew he was there.

“So, did Bruce give you some ointment for that rash?” Clint piped up after a minute.

Phil didn’t bother resisting the urge to roll his eyes. “Hilarious, Barton. I’m dying with laughter.”

They fell into an easy silence, Phil standing behind the couch and all of them focused on the movie. None of them moved or spoke again until the credits were rolling. Phil turned to leave the room, needing to reassess how it would be best to approach Clint, when Natasha spoke up. “It’s karaoke night tonight. You should join us.”

He could tell by her tone that she was still somewhat furious about the fact that Phil still hadn’t told Clint everything. And that she was hoping he would agree simply so that she could find a way of forcing him to talk to Clint.

Phil shook his head. “I can’t. Work to do. Besides, I was under the impression that karaoke night is a team-building exercise.”

Clint’s head whipped around and Natasha simply raised an eyebrow at him, explaining. “That is exactly why it would be fine for you to come.”

“Except I’m your handler. I’m not a part of the team.” The words more or less slipped out before Phil could censor them. They had way too much of his bitterness still laced in them and there was no way either Clint or Natasha would miss it.

There was a flash of blue and suddenly Clint was fluttering in front of Phil’s face. “You are a part of this team.” Phil couldn’t quite read the tone of his voice through the translator nor could he figure out exactly what emotion was on his feathered face. Being so lost about what Clint was thinking wasn’t something he was used to and it only served to emphasize everything that he’d lose if Clint stayed as a bird. “Just as much as any of us are.” Clint continued.

“It’s a lovely sentiment, Barton. But I’ve seen my job title. Nowhere on there does it say ‘Avenger’.” Phil spun and strode from the room. He needed to get away from that conversation before it got out of hand. He should have known Clint wouldn’t let it drop that easily. He could hear the flapping of wings following him into the kitchen. Phil stopped where Banner had earlier, leaning back against the counter in an attempt to seem at ease.

Clint flew right into Phil’s space, getting in his face. It was hard for Phil to focus on him when he was moving up and down slightly with each beat of his wings. “Coulson, do you really not realize that you’re a part of this team.”

“I’m not having this discussion with you, Barton.” Phil kept his voice calm despite the storm he could feel bubbling inside him. Trust Barton to pick at the one thing that had always been a open wound. A spark of an idea hit Phil then. The perfect topic change that would be sure to distract Clint enough to let the team thing drop. “But now that I’ve got a moment, there was something I wanted to tell-”

“Can it Coulson!” Barton cut him off. “You don’t get to side-step this. This isn’t a joke and it certainly isn’t something I’m going to let drop. This is serious. Do you not think of yourself

as part of this team?"

Phil was battling internally; dozens of versions of himself vying for dominance. The Agent side of him noted the role reversal going on here. It also said Phil needed to regain control of this situation and remind Barton who the superior officer is. But another part of him, a sadly too-large part, was already too wound up from the entire cluster-fuck that this week was turning into. That this month was turning into. Hell, the cluster-fuck that was his everyday life now. And that part was winning out over everything else.

"I am not an Avenger, Barton." The Agent side was clinging desperately for control still. "My job is to monitor you all. To make sure that you do not harm yourselves and to make sure that you all maintain at least a somewhat healthy level of sleep to ensure that you are able to complete missions. My job" the anger and bitterness were forcing their way through and Phil had to grit his teeth against it. "is to deal with PR & HR & to file the thousand and one forms that you people go through. Do you realize that I've had to oversee the creation of no less than 70 new forms and regulations in the last year alone?" The anger was quickly eating away at what little remained of Phil's calm.

"But you're still-" Clint started.

"DON'T YOU DARE!" Phil bellowed. "Don't you dare say that I'm still a part of this team. I have never been a part of the team. I was never meant to be. And if you honestly didn't realize that, then maybe I need to consider whether or not you have enough intelligence to still be in the field. Why do you think I'm the only one with my own full private quarters; my own kitchen, while the rest of you share. Why do you think my chair in the living room is positioned the way it is. Why do you think I'm always busy doing paperwork while you all have karaoke night? Why do you think I've never told you how -" Phil snapped his mouth shut, stopping the flow of words just soon enough to stop himself from admitting something that would have truly been impossible to take back.

Clint was just staring at Phil with what he guessed to be shock. "We - How - " Clint stuttered, looking for the right words. Only, Phil knew that there were no right words.

"It's fine, Barton. I made peace with my place in this organization a long time ago." Phil sidestepped, careful to squeeze past Clint without touching him, and headed for the hall to his room.

But apparently his outburst still wasn't enough to deter Clint. He heard a flutter of wings. "You're being stupid about this, Phil."

Phil spun around, accidentally spinning too fast and throwing himself off balance and he flung out an arm as he spun in order to balance himself against the far wall. Only his hand connected with something else first. Something small and soft and feathery that was knocked across the kitchen and into the fridge. Clint let out a squawk as he hit.

Every word that Phil had been about to say fled from his mind along with his anger. He could feel the blood drain from his face as he spotted the crumpled heap of blue lying awkwardly at the base of the fridge. He hesitated, not sure what he should do. As Clint shifted, moving to try and get up, Phil fled.

It had been an accident. He would never harm Clint on purpose. But what did intention matter now? He wouldn't be able to face Clint after this. Would never be able to forgive himself, let alone dare to ask forgiveness from Clint.

The second Phil got into his office he locked the door behind him and slumped to the ground. He let his head drop back against the door with a thunk. "Way to go, Phil." He muttered to himself. "Drive him to make deals with Loki because you're so concerned about his safety then you go and punch him into a fridge. Brilliant. Just fucking brilliant."

Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Phil wasn't sure how much time had passed before there was a knock at his office door. Enough time for him to down what was left of the bottle of scotch he kept buried in the bottom drawer of his filing cabinet. He didn't bother moving from his spot, wedged between said filing cabinet and a bookshelf, to try and answer the door. There was only one person it could possibly be and they would be barging in here with or without his permission.

Sure enough the door swung open a few moments later, quietly shutting again the moment a shadow had slunk through. Natasha's eyes scoured the room and the moment her eyes landed on Phil her face contorted in rage. "What the hell was that?!!"

Phil didn't respond, instead tipping up the empty scotch bottle attempting to get out the last few drops of alcohol. His mind was a buzz of white noise but it still wasn't enough. Half a bottle of scotch and he felt like the world was spinning and tipping around him and that his stomach was spinning with it, but the guilt and shame and self-loathing were all still there, just as strong as ever.

Natasha crossed the room and squatted down in front of him, trying to meet his eye. "Coulson, Clint has a mild concussion. Banner wanted to run tests to look for further damage but Clint won't let him. And he won't tell them how he was hurt. He won't tell me either but that doesn't mean that I don't know."

"Cause you were spying on us." Phil muttered, trying desperately again to drain the scotch bottle and wishing that more would magically appear.

"Damn lucky for you that I was! Who knows how long Clint would have been lying there otherwise. Seeing as you just left him there."

"I knew you were spying. You had him." Phil mumbled.

"It doesn't change the fact that you are hurting him. Even if it is on accident, you keep hurting him more an-"

"You think I don't know that?!" Phil finally looked up to meet her eyes. "You think I don't realize that every time I try and help him all I end up doing is hurting him more? You think I don't realize that I'm the one who drove him to this? It's my fault any of this happened in the first place. I was the one who sent him into that building. I knew Loki was the one behind that smoke and I knew Clint's history with his magic but I sent him in anyway. Because that was what the team needed. Because it was the logical and unbiased move and because I was trying so hard not to let my emotions change anything. That's all I ever do anymore. I just keep trying to fight against what I want and it keeps pushing those things further and further out of my reach. Which is what I'm fighting for, sure, but it doesn't make it any easier to watch those things leave. To watch them find their own lives outside of you."

Phil was rambling and he knew it, but he couldn't seem to stop the words that were pouring out of his mouth. "And it just keeps getting harder. Because sometimes I see this look on his face, like maybe he's wanting something more out of life. Like maybe being an Avenger isn't the end all be all for him. And I start to hope. That maybe he wants someone to share it with. Maybe that's the reason he gets this small little crease between his eyes whenever Thor is talking about Jane. But I can't let myself think that because that leads to me making decisions that could harm the rest of you. And as much as I can't stand to hurt him, it would kill me to know that one of you got hurt or worse simply because I couldn't keep my emotions in check. And-"

"Phil, breathe." Natasha finally cut him off and he took a deep breath in, noting how it shook as he let it back out. "Better?"

He shook his head. "Not really."

"Okay, look." She shifted so that she was sitting cross-legged in front of him, their knees touching. "I'm not good with emotions. You and Clint know that more than anyone else." Phil's lips twitched up in a smile because, yeah, Natasha and emotions were a volatile combination. "But just because I'm not in tune with my own doesn't mean that I can't recognize them in others. It was one of the things I was trained for. Spot the enemy's weaknesses. Find the thing they love the most so that you can use it against them. So, while I cannot say what Clint's feelings are entirely, I can tell you this: he cares about you more than anyone else in the world. Except maybe me. But I don't really count."

Phil scoffed. "Maybe he used to. But kinda hard to care about the man who puts you under house arrest only so he can punch you into a fridge."

"Something which Clint would have explained outright to the others if he was upset over it. He could have told them and they would have been right here with me busting your balls. But he didn't. He kept silent and simply told Bruce that it had been an accident."

"I can't, Natasha. I know what you're trying to hint at and I just can't." Phil curled up and buried his head in his hands. "I will talk to him and apologize for what I did and explain the 15 minutes to him. I'll do it all with a straight face and won't expect anything more, just like I've done every day since I've met him. Because I can't do anything else."

"Coulson-"

"No. Natahsa. Just, no." Phil pulled himself to his feet, using the bookshelf to balance when the world started tipping under his feet. "I'll fix what I broke. I'll get Clint back and that's it. But right now," He pushed himself forward, stumbling across the room and landing heavily against the door, yanking it open. "I need some more to drink."

;;;

It was into the early hours of the morning when Phil found himself on one of the dozens of balconies. This one had always been his favorite simply for the view. It looked out over Central Park and the view at night of buildings glittering around the expanse of trees never

failed to be an intoxicating sight. Nature living in harmony with technology. Modern butting right up against wilderness. Well, as much of a wilderness as you could find in New York.

He was sitting in the corner where the balcony railing met the wall with his legs stretched out, almost touching the far edge of the fairly small space. He dropped his head to the side, against the cool glass barrier, wishing that wishing hard enough could make a hangover go away. His head was throbbing with each heartbeat and his stomach hadn't stopped spinning in circles since he'd finished the original bottle of scotch. But he'd taken some tylenol already and at least the fresh air was helping, if only a tiny bit. And he needed all of the help he could get knowing the sort of conversations his day would hold.

A groan of pain escaped him just as there was a small whoosh through the balcony door, which he'd left propped open just a crack. (To keep from accidentally being locked out. Jarvis had gone into extreme lock-down mode with the balconies since learning of Loki's visit.) He glanced over, trying not to move his head because that caused it to throb in pain, and saw the last thing on earth that he wanted to see right now.

Hawkeye settled down on the edge of the railing across from him, looking out over the Park. He was holding himself awkwardly, balancing more on one foot than the other, and too-stiff. Signs that A) Phil had done more damage than just the concussion Barton had fessed up to & B) Barton knew perfectly well that Coulson was there, even if he was doing his best to ignore him.

They sat together in silence. Phil was determined not to say anything, at least not yet. He was still too off-center from the alcohol. And booze had always had a way of making him spit out all of the secrets he wanted to keep hidden. Which, right now, was the absolute last thing he wanted to happen.

So he waited, staring out at the Park without really seeing it while being all too aware of each of Barton's tiniest movements.

And then he waited some more. Noting how Barton sighed and shifted in obvious signs of discomfort and unhappiness, but still said nothing.

The sun was just beginning to peek over the edges of the far-off skyscrapers when Phil finally hit the perfect tipping point between wanting to stay silent and needing to say something.

"Natasha said you have a concussion."

It was small. Just a simple comment. Not even a question so that Barton could ignore it if he wanted to. For a moment Phil thought he would. But then he spun, using his wings to flip around in midair before settling back on the railing and glaring at Phil. Phil shrunk down, trying to make himself disappear under the blame and anger he felt burning out from those eyes. He couldn't bring himself to look at Barton, instead staring at the joint where one of the railing beams met the cement floor.

Another long second passed. So long that Phil was beginning to wonder if it would be best if he left. Not just the balcony, but his position as the Avengers liaison. If maybe Barton would never forgive him for this or trust him again, which he couldn't blame him for. Because

despite everything they had been through over the years, never once had Coulson directly caused Barton any sort of harm. Never by his own hand. That was the sort of thing Barton had had far too much of in the past.

“I’m still not willing to let this drop.” Barton said finally. And that.... that didn’t make sense. Because when had Phil asked him to drop the subject of Phil slamming him into the fridge? Phil’s eyes snapped up momentarily, meeting Barton’s for half a second before dropping back down. “About you being part of this team.” Barton clarified.

Phil felt the anger instantly bubbling up. He buried his head in his hands, grinding the palms into his eyes and focusing on the pressure rather than the urge to flee. “Barton.” It came out much more like a plea than he had intended.

“I’m not saying that we have to get into it again right now, just...” He paused and Phil glanced out from between his fingers. “I know how I feel and how all of the rest of us feel. And I just can’t quite understand how you see things so differently.”

“Because that’s what it’s my job to do.”

Barton nodded once; his only response.

They were silent again for another long few minutes. Only now, rather than wanting to run, Phil was trying to find a way to tell Barton everything. Or mostly everything. All of the things Barton really did need to know and that Phil should never have kept from him in the first place. It should have been easy, getting the words out when the alternative was never getting his archer back, but they stuck in his throat.

“I’m headed in to HQ tomorrow.” He blurted out finally. Not quite the words he meant to say, but enough to break the awkward silence.

“Thanks for the update.” Barton grumbled.

“I was wondering if you’d like to come with me?”

Barton’s eyes snapped onto Phil, looking him over carefully as if weighing every word. “Banner already ran a full work-up. I don’t need to go to Medical too.” Barton spoke slowly and carefully and Phil chose to keep on topic rather than calling him out on the obvious lie. Given how much Barton was favoring his left foot there was at least something sprained there.

“I don't mean for that. I mean-” he sighed, eyes dropping to where his hands were twisting in his lap. He focused on stilling them before continuing. “I have something I need to explain to you, but I need you to let me finish before you say anything.”

Barton nodded while straightening his back in what Phil recognized as him bracing himself for bad news.

“You know full well that our jobs often entail putting ourselves in the line of fire. Just as it entails putting our teammates there and trusting them to get the job done without getting

themselves killed."

"What does this -" Barton started. Phil held up a hand to silence him.

"Please let me finish. It's taken me weeks to try and build up the courage to have this conversation and if you interrupt then I'm not sure I'll be able to go through with it.

Anyway, as I was saying, our jobs are dangerous. My very first mission as a handler I was forced to choose between the life of one of my operatives or the success of the mission. To this day I still remember the sound of his screams as I let him die. I had no choice. It was his life or that of hundreds of innocent people. I kept reassuring myself that we've all been trained for this. That we all know that each mission could be our last and that the odds are high that we'll die in the line of duty. I thought I had come to terms with that."

Phil swallowed back the memories that were trying to force their way up. The static of the comms in the warzone, still not enough to completely hide his agent's terrified screams as the soldiers had let loose a barrage of bullets. He shook his head to clear it and nearly fell over, having momentarily forgotten his lingering hangover in the wave of memories..

"I've never once lost an agent unless it was absolutely necessary for the safety of civilians. And I would have gladly switched places with every single one of them. I still go over the old reports occasionally, looking for where I could have done things differently or made a better call and brought them home alive. It's not a healthy process, I know, plenty of shrinks have told me that, but I can't stop myself from doing it. Because I always find something that I can use in the future.

It's why I manage to stay so level-headed in the field, and... and it's why I sometimes overreact if there is a chance that I may lose an agent to something trivial or easily avoidable. It's reached the point that I often temper information to ensure that none of my agents are even tempted to do anything immeasurably stupid.

And then there's you. The man who jumps from roofs for fun. Who uses the lip of HQ's roof as a balance beam. Who never backs down from any sort of dare or challenge, no matter the risks to your safety. I've lost count of the number of times I've gotten a call from Medical about you and I worried that you had finally managed to get yourself killed.

That's to say nothing of your recklessness on missions. The op in Cairo, where you went silent for three minutes after that explosion... I thought we'd lost you."

Phil wasn't sure when his voice had dropped to a whisper. Or when Barton had moved to perch gently on Phil's knee. "I'm still here, Coulson." Barton croaked, his emotions undreadable through the scratch of the translator. "I'm alive and I'm safe. Cairo wasn't even the worst thing we've been through together."

"What did I say about interrupting?" Phil attempted to laugh but it faltered, coming out as a huff.

"I'm just saying, Belize was definitely worse than Cairo."

Phil shook his head, regretting it as soon as he did for having again forgotten the effects of his binge drinking the night before. “Belize was easy.”

“You nearly died. You were stabbed three times in the gut and nearly bled out before I could get there with back-up. Which involved having to fight through a hoard of henchmen, by the way. Belize was far from easy.”

“Still not as bad as Cairo, though. At least, not for me. In Belize it was me dying, not you. I can handle me dying, I’m prepared for that. But I’m not prepared to lose you.” His words were followed by a ringing silence broken only by the sounds of their breathing and the occasional car horn from the streets far below. For a second Phil was scared that maybe he’d revealed too much and that Barton would fly off before Phil got a chance to try and explain away the words.

Barton’s talons tightened slightly and Phil panicked, worried that Barton was leaving. “I’ve been lying to you for the last month.” He blurted out, trying to get him to stay. Barton’s talons squeezed harder, biting at Phil’s skin through the fabric of the suit pants he’d never bothered changing out of.

“Lied about what?” Barton asked hesitantly.

“When Rogers changed back to human, there was a fifteen minute grace period between the first sign and the actual transformation.”

Phil glanced up to see Barton’s jaw hanging open in shock. “Fifteen minutes?” He whispered the words, repeating them almost like a reverent prayer. “Fifteen minutes. Fifteen. I have fifteen minutes.”

“I’m sorry.” Phil said finally. His words seemed to snap Barton out of whatever daydream he was in, his eyes narrowing onto Phil.

“You’ve kept me in the Tower under the 10 foot rule for a month when you *knew* I had enough time that I would be safe no matter where I flew?” Barton growled. “You... You knew how much... how I’ve always wanted... How could you?”

“There was no guarantee that just because Steve had such a large warning that you would too. And I know you, Barton. If you thought you had fifteen minutes then there would be no possible way to keep you grounded for more than a few seconds at a time.”

“So you lied to me? And Steve! You got Steve to lie to me too.”

“I ordered him to not tell you. They were all furious when they found out.”

Barton’s talon tightened again on Phil’s knee. “They all? They all knew?”

Phil nodded. “Natasha overheard Steve and I discussing it. It spread from there. You know how it is with them and secrets.”

“Yet they managed to keep it from me. They willingly chose to let me keep thinking that... that I... Not even Natasha told me.” Barton dropped off into a whisper. “Do they not even...”

Barton fell silent and still, seeming to sink into himself. Phil knew he should probably do or say something to explain. Natasha was Barton's everything; the solid rock he trusted more than anything. He could only imagine just how thrown off Barton was by the fact that she kept something like this from him.

He opened his mouth to speak but Barton beat him to it. "Does the your earlier offer still stand? About me going with you to HQ tomorrow?"

Phil's mind took a second to catch up to the change of topic. "Yes. Of course."

"Am I still expected to keep under ten feet?"

And now Phil had to consciously stop his jaw from dropping. Barton asking about rules rather than just breaking them whenever he felt like it, that was unheard of. "Given the fact that you now understand the warning time you might get before switching back, I don't think the ten foot rule is applicable any longer. However," Phil added the last word quickly as Barton spread out his wings.

Barton paused with his wings outstretched. "New rules?"

"Recommendations." Barton relaxed at the word, folding his wings back in. "A few precautions I would appreciate if you took." Phil paused, waiting for Barton to freak out again or do a backwards dive off the balcony. Something that showed a hint of Barton's usual snark, but the fight seemed to have gone out of him the moment Phil had mentioned Natasha lying to him.

When Phil waited too long, Clint finally spoke. "I assume there is still a height limit?"

Phil nodded. "Keeping it to a few hundred feet would be preferable. I'd also feel better if you took one of us with you when you do go out." Phil instinctively paused for the argument from Barton. But, again, none came. He sighed before continuing. "Having someone there would be useful for when you do turn back. Just in case something goes wrong. Or if you happen to land in the middle of the street, you'll need someone to keep the press at bay until you get somewhere safe."

"I'll try and keep that in mind. Is that all?"

He sounded so small and lost and dejected. Phil had never heard him sound like that. Not even when they'd first found him on the streets, alone and always one edge. Even then there had been some spark of attitude. It's what had drawn Phil to him.

"Yes, that's all. Just please try to be careful. Falling isn't the only danger out there. You're small now; easier to kill. Try and remember that."

Barton nodded and quickly took to the air. Phil's heart stuttered as he cleared the edge of the balcony, speeding out over the city. So much for Phil's recommended precautions. All he could do was hope that he'd done the right thing in finally telling Barton. Well, that, and he could go and find more tylenol to make his head finally stop throbbing.

Chapter End Notes

I've feel like a broken record, because it feels like every other chapter I have to apologize for taking so long to update. Life just kept getting in the way.

Chapter 11

Clint's bones felt even more empty than usual as he soared out over the city. The sights and sounds felt hollow and distant but it was welcoming and kept drawing him forward. It reminded him of old times when he would go out into the throngs of people crowding city streets just to lose himself in the chaos. When he could surround himself with people who would never ask questions or look twice at him as he passed by. It was refreshing and freeing, and something that he hadn't felt the need to do in years. Not since he and Nat and Coulson had solidified into something more than just a team.

But they had lied to him. They had both kept him grounded when they knew he would be safe in the air. Even worse, they had gotten the rest of the team to lie to him as well. So that every single person who Clint truly trusted himself around were all working together to keep things from him. And now all of the walls that time and trust had torn down were rebuilding themselves faster than he could try and reason them away.

So he did the one thing that had always worked to clear his mind. More than getting lost in a crowd or shooting his bow until his fingers bled, nothing compared to the simple freedom of soaring through the air. Normally he relied on ropes and trapezes and safety nets; things that he didn't need now. And, as he folded his wings to his side and plummeted towards the ground, he couldn't help but laugh at the sheer ecstasy of it. The pavement speeding closer and closer and the wind whistling past him, whipping the myriad of thoughts clogging his mind away with it. Until he spread his wings just inches from the ground, pushing himself back upwards as fast as his wings could take him. Using that exertion to push out the last few lingering thoughts and emotions.

When the anger and hurt fell away he stopped climbing, letting himself glide effortlessly over the city. He was high above even the tallest skyscrapers, the world below him nothing more than a sea of glistening glass and metal. It was silent and still from this far away and gave the city a peacefulness Clint had only ever dreamed of. Only it was even better than his dreams, the stillness of it, as he found himself in a place where he was finally outside of everyone's reach. Where he didn't have to keep looking over his shoulder for a threat. Where he didn't have to try and think ten steps ahead of everyone else in order to stay safe. Where he was finally able to simply be, to exist without any effort at all.

It was more than just his mind going blank, that happened every time he practised for hours on the range. It felt more like his entire soul was scrubbed clean. As if it was a fresh, new slate and that all of his past sins and pains were nothing more than things that had happened to a character in a book he'd read. He was tempted to say it was the happiest that he'd ever felt but that wasn't the right word for it. Rather it was contentedness. As if all of the pieces of his life had finally slotted into their proper places.

Because he was finally free. Free to see the world in a way that he had never imagined. Free to feel the air and relish in it without guilt or fear. He wasn't going to poof back into human form at any second. He wasn't causing Nat or Coulson to freak out. Right this second, they might as well have not existed for the time he had to spare on thinking about them anyway.

They didn't exist up here. Not them, nor the rest of the team, nor any of the other people who had lied to him. There were no monsters or aliens or mind-controlling gods. No responsibilities or reality. It was emptiness. And it felt like the first breath of air after drowning.

Clint drifted down, spiraling in slow, easy circles until he was just above the buildings. The buzz of the city below filtered up towards him and it sounded different than it had just a little while before. As if his ears no longer wanted to hear any anger behind the constant din. He stayed at that height, flitting around the tallest of skyscrapers. It was completely opposite of the last time he'd flown out free over the city. He flew lazily, not forcing himself to get all of his energy out in one quick burst. This wasn't going to be the last time he flew. He had time to simply enjoy himself.

When the sun was just past overhead he started to consider heading back to the Tower. He isn't sure that he wanted to face the others yet. He wasn't really angry at them anymore, not like he knew they would expect him to be. Slightly frustrated, yeah, and still not ready to fully trust them again, but the anger itself had vanished into the wind. He decided on simply taking a long, round-about way home. Crisscrossing the city and occasionally swooping low enough that he was forced to follow the grid of the streets, the skyscrapers forming a maze of windows.

He was so lost in the joy of it that he almost didn't notice the shadow in time or the sound of accompanying wing-beats. He spun to the side just as outstretched talons slipped past him. Instantly Clint's mind sped into overdrive, thinking through his options. The bird that had gone after him was too large for him to fight against and he wouldn't be able to outrun it. But he might be able to outmaneuver it.

He sped forward, ducking down low and spiraling to the right around the corner of a building. As he did, he got a better look at the bird and felt himself resolving that there was no way in hell he was going to let it beat him. He did not want his dying legacy to be that of the Hawkeye who was killed by a hawk.

The chase continued, with Clint weaving and dancing around the hawk as it screeched and kept kept diving for him but never quite reaching. There were a few close calls, when outstretched talons brushed through Clint's outer feathers or when a beak snapped down and pulled out a small tuft from his tail. With every twist and turn Clint took them closer and closer to the safety of the Tower until finally he was flying above the stone tiles of his favorite balcony, aimed for the glass doors leading inside.

The doors were locked and Clint pecked rapidly at the glass to get Jarvis' attention. He saw a flash of movement in the reflection and stopped flying, dropping down to the ground just as the hawk thudded loudly against the glass above him. It dropped down beside him, neck twisted at an unnatural angle. Clint slumped against the glass, heaving and shaking from the adrenaline flooding his veins.

There was a pounding of footsteps and the door behind Clint whooshed open with him just managing to stop himself from falling over when the part he was leaning on disappeared. He staggered slightly, limp from exhaustion, and looked up to see the entire team staring down at him with varying levels of concern.

"Are you okay?"

"What happened?"

"You're back!"

They all spoke up at the same time, none of them leaving a break for Clint to actually respond. He just sat there, nodding his head occasionally and assuring them that yes, he was fine and that it wasn't him that had hit the window.

Which, of course, was when Tony figured out just what the other bird was. "Did you almost lose to a hawk?" The shit-eating grin on his face promised Clint that this was something Tony would never let go of. And knowing Tony, the story was going to get more outlandish with each retelling and never in Clint's favor. He figured that by the end of the week half of SHIELD would hear the story of how Tony had been forced to shoot the hawk with a repulsor in order to pry its talons from around Clint's neck.

So Clint chose to ignore him, instead taking off into the Tower and settling on his makeshift bird stand in the corner of the kitchen. The others followed along behind a moment later, scattering themselves around the room. Natasha perched herself onto the counter nearest him, holding herself slightly too stiff for even her normal pretense at relaxation. As Clint glanced around the room he noticed that all of them were slightly on edge and kept glancing over at him before letting their eyes drop.

Which is when it clicked in Clint's head that they all knew that he knew the truth. They were tense because they were expecting him to be furious with them. Five sets of eyes on him, waiting for him to start yelling or freaking out or doing any of the things Clint would normally do in a situation like this. But that's where they were wrong, because there weren't normally situations like this. Not ones where he was transformed into a bird, anyway. The 'being lied to by everyone he trusted' wasn't actually all that unfamiliar.

And even as the thought crossed his mind he could feel the anger coming back. Memories flashed through his mind of all of the times he had been betrayed. Of the people who had left him bleeding out and dying and all alone. With each betrayal it had become harder and harder to move on afterwards, but he'd always done it. And for what? So that he could finally be lied to by the people he counted as family?

Clint huffed, trying to fight back the venom he could feel boiling in his veins. It felt stifling, after the peacefulness of the open sky. He wanted to leave. To say 'screw it' and fly back out the door and into the sky. Flying wouldn't be quite as calming after nearly being lunch to a hawk, but it would be better than being stuck in a house full of traitors.

Natasha, as usual, seemed to read his mind. "I wanted to tell you."

"So why didn't you?" Clint snapped. Inwardly he chided himself. He couldn't let himself openly feel around these people anymore. They had kept things from him. He shook his head. "It doesn't matter now." Clint kept his voice calm this time.

Natasha's face went blank. "We were following Coulson's orders." She spoke slowly and carefully.

Clint barely stopped himself from laughing. "Because you are always such a perfect soldier."

"Clint." Thor took a step forward, putting himself slightly between the glaring contest that was going on between Clint and Nat. "We did not keep this from you happily."

"But you did it anyway." Clint couldn't meet Thor's gaze. He was trying not to think about the deal he had almost made just one day before. Or about the way that Thor had tried so hard to advise Clint against it. Or how hard Thor had been working to make him feel needed and appreciated. Thor had honestly tried to help, even if he had still been lying as he did it. The guilt and anger were becoming too much for Clint to handle. He needed a distraction. "Jarvis, what is Agent Coulson's current location?" He asked, turning away from the others.

"He's in his office. He asked me to inform you that his offer from this morning still stands."

"Thanks, Jarvis." Clint took off down the hall, ignoring the others trying to call him back. Hanging out with Coulson wasn't very high up on Clint's current list of fun things to do, but he had questions that only Coulson could answer.

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There was a familiar soft whooshing sound and Phil looked up to see Barton perch himself on the back of one of the chairs facing his desk. Phil looked him over quickly, scanning for any damage that may have been done during Barton's run in with the hawk. He could see a few feathers out of place but nothing that looked serious. Still, he asked out of habit, "Situation report?"

"Nothing more than some ruffled feathers." Barton responded. Phil couldn't tell if he was trying to be funny or not. The gleam in Barton's eye that normally gave him away was missing. "Can I ask when you're planning to go to HQ?" Clint asked, his voice nearly monotone.

So apparently the time spent outside flying hadn't restored Barton's usual good humor like Phil had been hoping. Which, really, he shouldn't be that surprised. One morning out flying wouldn't be enough to make up for the weeks that Phil had kept him under house arrest. Still, Phil just wanted this to be over and done with. He wanted his old Barton back. He wanted the witty, sarcastic archer who never shut up over comms. The sniper who could stay as still as a statue for days yet who was quick and light on his feet enough to escape from anywhere. He wanted the man who smiled and laughed and had just started relaxing enough to truly trust the people he worked with.

"Sir?" Barton pressed when Phil didn't answer immediately.

"We can leave whenever you want." Phil said, snapping out of his thoughts. He needed to focus on the Barton in front of him in the here and now.

"That's for you to decide, sir." Barton answered. He was still standing stiff and unmoving on the chair back. "After all, you're the one with all of the information."

Phil sighed. So this formality and calmness was still Barton being an ass. It was his way of telling Phil just how pissed off he was by the lying. "I tried to explain this to you. I was trying to protect you."

Barton quirked his head slightly. "I'm sorry, sir, but I don't understand what that has to do with when we leave for HQ."

'Smart ass,' Phil thought. Half a second later it was replaced by 'Shit, I fucked up.' Out loud, he just said. "I'm sorry." Barton huffed once but otherwise didn't move or speak. So Phil continued. "I knew full well what I was doing and what I was keeping you from. I knew that what I was doing was unfair to you and entirely selfish on my part. I'm sorry for lying to you, and I'm sorry for forcing the rest of the team to lie to you too."

Phil barely dared to breathe as he waited to see how Barton would respond. For a moment, he didn't. And then, finally, his posture loosened just a fraction. It was only the tiniest of shifts, but it was enough for Phil to know that there was at least a chance of being able to fix all of the things he had screwed up.

"Can we go to HQ now?" Barton asked quietly.

Phil nodded. "Of course." He smiled, quickly shutting down his computer and gathering his things. Right now, Barton could ask the world of Phil and he would give it to him. Having him still willing to spend time with Phil in any way was something he hadn't been expecting. The fact that Barton had even come back to the Tower in the first place had been relief enough for Phil. Because he understood. He really did. He knew that he'd well and truly shattered Barton's entire view of his teammates. And that now it was up to Phil to put everything back together again.

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